

Reaching for the Stars – by Haştse Apxan

Chapter 43: One the Question of Standing Still

It's here.

Warning: the usual but intensified five times.

Tom gripped the cup tight. The nightmares were worsening again. Last night he couldn't sleep, the nightmare too vivid to ignore. He had been sitting on the balcony since, watching the sky and the city to help his mind calm down.

"Can you feel it? It's our inner desire talking. Don't fight it."

He sighed a little. *"I know."*

"What are you waiting for then? Can I take over?"

With trembling hands, he sipped from the cup. *"No. We're done with it."*

"Aw, come on! It's not like we're gonna kill someone!"

"I shan't do it."

People were walking on the streets below. He wondered, could he just take one or two and stretch his claws for a bit. There was no basement here, but the living room would be enough.

But no... he was done with that.

He knew he couldn't fight the feeling, so he just let it flow. No use in stopping what he could not stop. What he could do was only not do it.

It was one thing he had to live with: PTSD. What started as one event, seeing his first stepparents get shot right before his eyes, became a chain of events that he was powerless to stop. At first, his mind used to scream at him to flee, to run to safety, to look for shelter, but after years of gunshot, of mental torture, of looking for safety that was never there, it turned to fight. It did not stop there, even. In the process of trying to relieve himself and denying it, it became the thing that birthed Lain, the personification of his anger and hatred.

Now, after it calmed down, he was forever scarred with two, even three personalities in one body and the increasing hunger for violence when he heard guns.

The wolf let out a sad sigh, his hands holding the cup tightly. He had no justification for it. Fate dictated this. Who was he to question fate? A fighter's highest honour was to die on the battlefield, in the same way they killed their victims. Left alone. Rotten. Forgotten.

Fate taught him that in this cruel world, either kill or be killed. Either adapt or die. Incompetence was not an option. Hate the world lest it hate you back.

Such profound statements indeed.

"You're no fun."

He just sighed. *"Yes, Lain. I'm no fun."*

"If something happens, can I do it?"

The way he asked it was cute, like a kid over their first candy. Tom chuckled hollowly and regretted what he was about to say. *"Yes, we can."*

He did not know whether it was him, Lain, or the third voice talking.

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Ever since he paid more attention to Tom, Max had been finding more and more small details about the wolf. Like the way his ears kept turning around when he heard something, or the way he could easily do something while keeping up a conversation, or the way he picked up something with his paws, they're all... different.

Even Octo seemed normal compared to him. As intimidating as the panther was, he still did things in the same way as them. Tom? There was something else. Was this how smart people behave? Or was this just the way he was wired? Was this because of his past?

Still, it was a good reason he had to watch over Tom more. He made it his personal responsibility to do so.

Max watched him silently as he ate. The way he handled the chopsticks was... different. Even Takegami didn't handle chopsticks like that. Tom made it look easy, like a toy, even. Max was sure Tom could even catch something in the air with them.

"You must try this! It tastes so good!" the wolf said, distracting him from his thoughts.

"Right." Max chuckled slightly, then picked up one piece of the meat and dipped it in his own seasoning bowl as he shook those thoughts away. He shouldn't be surprised when he couldn't pick it up again using chopsticks.

Tom laughed at him trying to pick it again. The seasoning was thick and slimy, so he had difficulties. "Mate, look." He said, making Max look at him. "You hold them like this."

"Y-yeah, I'm trying!"

Eventually, he managed to pick it up and ate it.

The meal was good; they even ordered another serving. However, he noticed that Tom didn't eat much. Max looked at their empty bowls and his expression turned concerned. Tom only ate... about a quarter of what they ordered.

They piled the empty bowls together. The wolf then stood up and walked to the cashier, smiling and speaking in another language. His tail swayed lazily, but he never wagged his tail.

He never wagged his tail.

Wagging tail was not limited to dogs, right? He remembered Kevin and Lucas wagging their tail when they were excited. He knew that dogs were the outliers in the canine family to usually have their tail pointing up, not down, but Tom never seemed to move his tail too much, let alone wag it. Was Tom never excited, did he never see him wag his tail, or did the wolf simply not wag his tail?

Max sighed a bit. Too bad Hans left before he could meet Tom. He'd like to know what did his brother, as an amateur doctor, thought of the wolf.

Tom waved at him, then he stood up and followed the wolf.

"So, where next?" he asked the wolf as they exited the restaurant. Subtly, he watched people around them. Many of them were glancing curiously at Tom, no doubt because of the staff on his back and his eyepatch. He was curious as to why he kept wearing the eyepatch, but he didn't want to press it. Tom seemed hesitant to take it off, and it didn't really bother Max, so he let it go. It did make him worry even more, though.

Fortunately, it was white, so it didn't stand out too much from the light grey fur on his face.

"Not sure, didn't really plan this." Tom chuckled. "You were the one who asked me to go out celebrating my thesis defence, you know."

"We watched the movie I wanted to watch, so what now?"

Tom scratched his ear. "Uh... yeah. What now?"

Max didn't miss the slight "*I bloody watched a movie with him*" he uttered.

"Eh, how about we just head to Leger and have some coffee and tea?"

"We're in the mall and you want to get to a café?" the shepherd chuckled.

"It's... loud here."

Max put his hand around the wolf's shoulder, understanding his dislike of loud places. "Aye then, let's go to Leger."

Just as the sun was setting, they exited the mall and went straight to the metro station, which fortunately was just a short walk from the mall. On the way, Max noticed that Tom seemed tense, as if anything might jump at him and he was

anticipating the worst. Coupled that with the wooden staff on his bag and he looked basically like a warrior looking for a fight.

Seriously, why the hell did he bring that? That was a weapon, harmless it might look, but still a weapon in skilful hands! He had asked him before, but the wolf just shrugged it off, saying that he'd just finished doing his exercise. Good thing it blended in almost perfectly with the small sling bag Tom was wearing, almost like an accessory.

They tapped their phones at the gate and stepped into the metro. Tom didn't sit, but he looked less tense than before. Max wasn't sure why was he so tense.

They descended the metro at Hallestead Station. Max wasn't familiar with the road, but according to Maps, there was a Leger a short walk from here. For some reason, though, the wolf was keen on getting a tram there.

"It's just a walk, Tom. Besides, the next tram isn't arriving in the next fifteen minutes." He said as they walked away from the station.

"Just... tram is better." Tom said, standing at the tram stop.

Max huffed. "It's fifteen minutes."

"I-it's okay."

"But it's just a five-minute walk there!"

Tom looked at him, surprised. That made Max regret raising his voice at him; really, it was nothing loud, just a tad louder, he often spoke like that with his friends. The wolf looked at him and his expression hardened, then nodded. "O-okay."

"Shit, Tom, sorry! I didn't mean—"

"Come on, I want some tea."

Max had no choice but to follow him.

The awkwardness was thick. The dog felt guilty; Tom didn't look at him again. He should've been more careful, dammit! The wolf was on edge today, and that only made it worse!

However, as they walked, he noticed Tom was wary of him less and less and was getting wary of things around him more and more. His tail was close to his legs, his ears occasionally flick in random directions, and most of all, he kept looking around him.

Max looked around and mentally slapped himself. He should've fucking known! No wonder Tom wanted to go by tram; this place is almost deserted. The road stretched like forever under the occasional lamps with woods on one side and seemingly abandoned buildings on another. By day, this place would be great

for taking a quiet walk or jog, but with the night coming, Max closed his distance with Tom as eerie feelings began to make him shudder.

Still looking around, he then walked into the wolf's back. "Ouch!"

Tom was staring at the road in front of him. His ears then flattened and he took a right turn.

Something was off.

"Uh, Tom, isn't Leger that way?"

"Yeah, but I figured it'd be better if we used a shortcut."

Max only raised his eyebrows. This was not a shortcut, but he didn't want to question him again.

Tom navigated the streets again. Max was worried, but he didn't dare ask him. Between the woods and buildings and the occasional vehicles, the area was empty. It was just twenty minutes past sunset, why was it so empty? He noticed several cars almost every time they took a turn, and he kept himself close to Tom.

Eventually, they walked into an empty alleyway. The alleyway was secluded, even. This was near the old factories, and the fact made him worried even more.

He heard several cars pulled up behind them, and something definitely was *off*.

Tom turned around and *growled*.

"Well, would you look at this? The wolf has taken the bait." Someone said as he exited the car.

Max looked at that horse, then at Tom, but before he could shield him, the wolf shielded him instead. "*Get the fuck away from here!*" shouted the wolf with lowered ears.

"Who are you to tell us what to do?"

"Tom, get back!" he told the wolf who looked more and more nervous.

"No! Max, get back!" He barked at him instead.

"No, you—"

"*Get back!*" he turned to the dog. "I don't doubt your ability to fight but you need to get back!"

What was going on?!

"So," the stranger from the car said as more dangerous-looking people entered the scene with guns and knives. "you ready to go down, wolf? Who's that doggo behind you? Eh, no matter."

Tom took a deep breath, then his demeanour suddenly changed. He turned calm and his ears went up, maybe in an effort to calm the dog, but it made him even more worried. How the heck did he turn from that tense to this calm very quickly?! “Max, get back, go away.” He said, but the dog shook his head.

“Tom, no! What the fuck is going on?!”

“Call the police right now.” The wolf put his bag down, took his jacket and bag off, took his staff, then actually stretched his body as if he were preparing himself. “If it be what it takes.”

Were they... were they going to *fight*?!

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Octo stared at the document in horror. *Operation Red Wolf. Objective: Eliminate Red Wolf.* What kind of sick fuck was this?!

He let out a concerned sigh to not seem too surprised. It sickened him; they even *dared* go to such length? He skimmed over the background section; this Red Wolf didn't even seem like a bad guy!

“Richard,” he asked the hyena, not glancing away from the document.

“Yes, sir?”

“What do we know about this ‘Red Wolf’?”

“Information about him is pretty vague at best. All I know is that he forcibly exited us, and the related department wasn't happy. They wanted to get him back or to scare him off so that he doesn't tell anyone about us.” explained Richard. “There was one small scale operation and minor skirmishes with Red Wolf before this. The only survivor of that past operation was Rodrigo, so he knows Red Wolf the most. Red Wolf managed to defeat us in the skirmish, so this one was launched to eliminate him.”

It... it was beyond disgusting. They did not even have a solid reason as to why?!

“Define eliminate.” He closed his eyes and took a breath.

“I... It would be better to ask this over to my boss.”

Meaning Richard doesn't know about the extent of this operation. “Any additional information?” he asked, flipping the pages. The biodata section was almost empty and there was no picture.

“Not much. He's very slick in avoiding attention. We don't even have a photo of him.”

“Didn't we scan everyone who joins us?”

“Yes, but somehow, Red Wolf managed to destroy all the files related to him in the city he left. No one really remembers him; it’s been a very long time ago.”

Well, that was something.

“All that we know about him now was that he’s attending Barrowisle University.”

What? *What?!* He was a uni student?! They were going to “eliminate” a *university student?!*

Suddenly, Kevin popped into his mind.

No, calm down. So... so the target was a uni student. He was a wolf, r-right, and based on his nickname, he has red fur...

...that was exactly Kevin!

Was there any other red-furred wolf in the uni?! He never noticed anyone! Tom was grey, Janette was bluish, Yamanaka was cream, Franco was brown.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

Could it be Kevin? Was it Kevin? Did he have some kind of connection with this operation? Did he even do drugs or is he a transporter of drugs?!

“A-and...” he trailed off. “what’s the status of this operation?”

“Ongoing since last week. We were waiting for him. But I just got a call that they had a visual on Red Wolf and are now trying to catch him.”

He didn’t have time! He closed the document and gave it back to Richard. Then, just nodding at the hyena, he walked out of the room and frantically pulled his phone to call Kevin, ignoring the two guards trying to catch up with him.

“Kevin, answer me, you fucking wolf!”

The call didn’t go through. He checked Kevin’s last seen and grew even more worried when he found it was 08.23 this morning, right at the same time as his last message.

Kevin Huntington: “nah its okay smell it if u got horny 🍆”

Did Kevin leave his jacket on purpose? Did he keep leaving it behind because he knew he might not come back one day?! Fuck, why was everything turning into a mess so quickly?!

He switched to regular call as he exited the building. “Fucking answer me! Stupid horndog!”

“S-sir, is all okay?” The guard from before asked him when he was at the main gate. He didn’t even realise he left the building.

“Y-yes, I’m leaving now.”

"Yes, sir."

He almost ran into several cars, but quickly apologised and went back straight on his way. Kevin wasn't answering his calls and his texts were undelivered. Where was he?!

Now, he had to get to his dorm! Maybe Kevin was just napping, he imagined, he just had a bad hangover and was now napping.

Or maybe he was in some dark room in the city with guns pointed at his head that can click at any moment *what in the fucking hell!*

Whom could he call? Whom could he call? Tom? Max? Andy? Yohan? Vilkas?

Vilkas!

He got on the bus after running as fast as he could to the nearest metro station. As he got on, he quickly pulled the husky's number and gave it a call.

Please answer! Please answer!

"Hello?"

Thank God!

"Vilkas, it's me, Octo." He said, trying not to be too loud on the bus. "Do you know where Kevin is right now?"

"Probably at his dorm sleeping. I'd say the library but that wanker fears books even if his thesis depends on it."

"Have you seen him today? Or recently?"

"Nope. Last saw him two days ago or something." The voice at the other end turned curious. *"Did something happen? You sound like you're gasping."*

"No, just curious. Thanks, Vilkas." He hung the call up before the husky could ask him any more questions.

Where the fuck was Kevin?! And why wasn't he answering the phone?!

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Crap, there's too many of them! Tom thought as he dodged shots after shots. He moved behind one of them, using him as a shield as he made out whom should he attack. Some shots landed on his non-essential parts, but he still managed.

The gunners.

When the shots stopped, he swiftly dashed towards the wall and leapt from it. He landed right on one of the gunners' face and kicked it as hard as he could, then leapt off again. Some of them stupidly shot their friend, killing him. He

landed on the roof of the cars, then before anyone could react, he threw his staff to one more and leapt to it.

The beaver screamed as he crushed his head using the wooden staff, he then took the gun and shot those near him, then dashed again towards the wall and back to where he had been before.

"Use the claws! Let them feel it!"

He jumped at the wall again and shot one more in the head. *"I can't! Not when there're guns around!"*

"You can withstand guns, dammit!"

Lain took control for a while, throwing his staff as hard as he could and used his claws to rip the shirt open.

"Fuck it, Lain!"

"Dammit, it's not sharp enough!"

He clicked his tongue and dashed away to hide behind a trash can. *"I told you! We need more than a slash to finish one of them with guns around!"*

"Ugh, fucking come out and fight!" the horse screamed.

Tom took control again. What could he do to defeat them? He had five gunners down, but who knew how many guns they had? They could just pick one and suddenly everyone was a gunner!

Wait,

He took a peek, and when he saw it was clear for him, he tumbled aside and jumped towards the wall again, getting a narrow shot on the shoulder in the meantime, and landed on the roof of a car. He quickly jumped down and true enough, he saw guns there.

Nice.

He cracked the window open with his staff and picked up two guns, shooting the rest of the guns and the phones that he could see in the car so that they couldn't contact anyone.

"You left, I'm right. You ear, I'm eye." He said to Lain.

Lain grinned. *"Damn right!"*

He opened fire at them, hiding behind the car. He managed to knock two of them down before retreating. Still looking at his left, he readied himself and glanced at the reflection on another car's window. They held back from shooting, some of them even looked scared. Weaklings.

All he could hear were gunshots, all he could smell was gunpowder and blood.

Standing up, he ran back towards where he was while still shooting at them. However, someone then punched his face *hard*. He grimaced, feeling blood on his mouth. Then another blow landed on his gut, then another on his cheek, then another on his chest. It sent him flying several metres away.

He lay on the ground for some time, staring at the sky. They stopped shooting, maybe they thought he was down. However, he smiled at the sky, feeling the excitement and the rush all over his body.

Lain was right, he kind of missed this.

Fuck, everything hurt so good. His lower jaw was slightly dislocated, there was blood in his mouth where his teeth scraped the insides of his mouth, and he noticed his fur was starting to paint red. It was all *so good*.

He and Lain both laughed, then stood back up and looked at them with a wide smile on his face, several drops of blood falling down. "Nice!" his smile turned into a slight grin after he put his lower jaw back into place. They also seemed to have run out of bullets. "Nice! How about some hands-on-hands, huh?" he said, dropping his guns.

Then, as thorns paved the way, he threw himself back into Death's embrace.

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Max was horrified—no, horrified was not a word strong enough to describe what he was feeling. He was... fuck! Tom was there, being shot at and punched at but he kept going. Just what kind of person was the wolf actually?!

The dog watched in horror as again and again Tom punched them, smashed them with his staff that looked weak compared to their weapons, and clawed at them. He knocked their guns down, making sure that they were on equal footing. Seriously, was the wolf a maniac or something?!

And not only that, he looked awesome yet terrifying at the same time. He moved, dodged around, and dashed with such precision. Was this... was this a regular thing? How did the wolf get so good at fighting?! How did Tom, a nervous and nice and understanding nerd, turn into such a... an expert fighter so quickly?!

Fuck!

He wanted to help, he *fucking* wanted to help. The wolf was getting beaten over there and he was here, doing nothing! He was supposed to be the one protecting the wolf, not the other way around!

But he could not... really, just a wrong shot and he could be dead. Just a wrong slash and he could be dead. There was so much blood all around, and one by one they fell over. He could only hide behind a big rubbish bin and avoided their attention.

Then Tom fucking ran from the side of a car and shot at them like a fucking scene from a badass film and his mind was blown. Tom could actually shoot guns?!

Max was about to take a bigger peek from the corner of the rubbish bin, only to be surprised to death when several guys repeatedly punched the wolf. It looked hurtful, and the last blow sent him flying a few metres away.

F-fuck!

"Tom, wake up!" he screamed. "Tom! What the fuck! *Tom!*"

He really wanted to run to the wolf but held back. Tom told him to stay here, and the threats of being shot lingered in the air.

"Thomas! Wake up!"

However, Tom then smiled and stood up slowly. He only watched as the wolf put his lower jaw back into place and smiled at them, blood dripping from the corners of his mouth. Max noticed something, and he couldn't contain his horror.

The wolf's eyepatch was off... someone must've pulled it off, and what he saw terrified him even more. His right eye... his right eye was *red, blood red*. The iris was fucking *red*.

Seriously, that wasn't normal, right? If all this time he was spooked out because of his faded brown eyes, now he was utterly *terrified* of his red eye.

"Nice! Nice! How about some hands-on-hands, huh?"

Comment: It's my first time writing a fight scene, so sorry if it's not accurate