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Silence In the Snow

Written by BlueKittyTales on commission for SaltirePhoenix as a gift for Navieux.
05/02/18

Sunday January 7th 2018, 17:46. Nova senses that his reservations about putting his trust into others cannot hold up forever.

"You told me this job would take us to strange new places in the new year." remarked Epsilon as he watched his older brother Nova putting on one of his most treasured outfits. Nova watched him in the mirror's reflection as he adjusted his soirée suit, a shade of woodland green with a black undershirt. He was a broad and very tall wingless bat whose purple fur and gold eyes were often said to help him blend into the night. While his build, namely his height and his large arms and hand paws, had scared some creatures, others had remarked that his ability to remain inconspicuous was rather useful. Epsilon was ten years his junior and was much smaller than he was, though he had a similar appearance. Indeed, many said that he was far more mature than his young age let on. "You've got a good opportunity on your paws."

"That might be true, dear boy," replied Nova, putting on a silver necklace and a sports watch and hiding both under the folds of his suit, "but I'm just not sure about this."

"What do you mean?" asked Epsilon as Nova. "Don't you remember what you told me about this guy?"

"Yes I do." answered Nova. "It reveals what can occur during a murder investigation."

"Just about anything, yes?" replied Epsilon. He climbed off the sofa and approached his brother, showing him a warm smile in the mirror. "You were on the phone to him after you got talking at that lonely hearts club. It might have been just a few minutes, but I'm not likely to forget that for a while."

"No, I imagine you won't." agreed Nova. "I don't think I will either." He grimaced as he recalled that night. He hadn't been in the club for very long before he'd found himself striking up a long conversation with an orange fox named Darren. He'd started out doing so only to avoid blowing his cover when he'd gone there to search for information on one of his suspect's two victims, but it hadn't taken long for Darren to become smitten with the bat, leading to them exchanging numbers before Nova had needed to leave to follow up another lead.

Soon afterwards, Darren had phoned him and requested a date. Nova had agreed under the club's rules, although he hadn't admitted that he'd always held reservations about putting his trust in others due to what he saw in his job and his memories of a cubhood he wanted to forget. Catching in his mind was the elation in Darren's voice upon having heard the sound of his again. He knew it took a lot to evoke emotion like this. But he was a largely solitary creature who didn't allow his emotions to show unless he was around Epsilon, and one of his biggest fears was there being a repeat of his cubhood. However, he observed that Epsilon believed this independence was to a fault. He wasn't sure how he wanted to play it, nor how he felt about the fox.

"You still seem unsure about this." commented Epsilon. *He's read me like a map.* he thought.

"You helped me pick the outfit, yes. But I'm simply not used to interacting with others unless I'm required to." said Nova. "It's different with you because you're my brother."

"Then which one of us is Tweedle Dee and which one of us is Tweedle Dum?" remarked Epsilon.

"Very funny." said Nova dryly. "I don't know how this will go. I know plenty of creatures my age have already had a relationship or three, but I'm not sure I'm in the correct frame of mind, nor feel ready for something like this. I don't even think I have feelings for him."

"Big brother, I might not be the right person to give you advice about this," said Epsilon, "but someone's got to. You can't go off to this date unprepared." Nova looked at him in anticipation. He was surprised to hear him use the word date, but reflecting on it, he couldn't think of another name for it. "First off, show him you

feel relaxed around him. And maybe lose the big vocabulary for a short while. He's gotta feel comfortable around you."

"You sure about that?" replied Nova. "The last thing I want is him thinking I'm some kind of idiot."

"Well, you're not." responded Epsilon. "If you were, then I doubt very much you would have held down your private investigator job for this long."

"I appreciate that, little brother." said Nova affectionately, stroking Epsilon on the shoulders.

"Any time, bigman." replied Epsilon. "Besides, you just have to get to know each other. Don't do what a lot of the boys at my school do with girls and act arrogant and cocky. Just let him get to know your real personality. And if you're on the town, it won't be too hard to make him feel like a king. Don't be afraid to make him feel like the luckiest fox alive." Nova looked at him anxiously. *There's no way I can predict where tonight will go.* thought Nova. *I can't get out of it now.*

"You're definitely maturing mentally much faster than your body is." commented Nova. "Sometimes I think you've picked up more wisdom and life experience than I have. And maybe that's true. I don't know everything that goes on at your school, but there are times when I think I'm the one who should be referred to as little brother."

"You don't have to know." remarked Epsilon. "It's a melting pot in there. The teachers at this school are even less sure how to deal with me than they were at my lower school."

"That's what they tell me. But they don't know you like I do." He smoothed out his suit and folded the collar on his undershirt. "So just go in casually?"

"I wouldn't exactly put it like that, but yeah, that's pretty much what I said." said Epsilon. Nova went to counter, but he was too fast for him. "I know what you're about to say. You're concerned about me. I get it, and I appreciate what you've done. But sometimes you've got to look after number one. You have a life now. Don't sacrifice everything and just live for my sake." Nova almost cut him off, but he realised that Epsilon's impassioned words were the truth. He couldn't remember the last time he'd put himself or his own desires first in any ways beyond treating himself to his favourite foods. Even then, he had not been willing to splash out much on them. When he went over these words in his head again, he felt a sudden burst of determination. He wanted to see this through, even if all that came from it was having an evening out. Whether a relationship was on the cards, he would find out soon, he thought.

"Alright, Epsilon." decided Nova as he slipped his wallet and keys into his suit jacket pockets. "I'll do it. For the pair of us."

"This isn't about me, Nova. Just get out there and have fun, alright?"

"But what about –"

"Don't worry about me, big brother. I'll be fine." said Epsilon with a bright smile. "I know how to cook. All you do is follow what's in the books."

"Well, you know what my number is if you need me, little brother. I'll see you later tonight." And he exchanged a warm hug with Epsilon before he grabbed his mobile phone and headed out. At that moment in time, he simply wanted to get it over with as soon as possible. But this school of thought was not to go unchallenged. Would it really be that easy to leave? Was there a future if he found a reason to stay? He didn't know what to expect. *So begins the next adventure of my life.* he thought.

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Nova found himself wishing he'd brought his winter parka with him, for the already low temperatures had plunged even further. What's more, his car's heater was slow to get up to the temperature he desired and he soon found himself shivering despite his coating of purple fur. Looking around in his journey revealed the streets were not as busy as he had expected them to be for a Friday night. He commonly observed small things like this as part of the second nature his job had given him, although this time he didn't pay it mind for long. At the moment, all he wanted to do was get the date over with as quickly as possible.

Despite this, he still wanted to make a good go of it. He stopped at a convenience store and bought a bouquet of yellow roses and a box of seashell shaped praline chocolates, rubbing his arms and shoulders all the while

in a bid to warm himself up as snow began to fall all around him. Going over it again, it seemed like an idea that was rather spur of the moment. But even if he saw no future for them, he at least wanted Darren to remember that night as something other than a complete letdown. He set off again, shaking the snow off his suit.

Panic briefly set in when he returned to his car, for the engine had become so cold that it wouldn't start. He was able to get going once he'd warmed up the battery and continued on to one of the city's railway stations. And as soon as he pulled up, he spotted Darren waiting under a canopy talking with two other foxes. *There he is*, he thought, his heart sinking as he flashed the car's headlights at him. In an unanticipated turn, however, it gave a leap the moment they met eyes. He didn't know why he suddenly felt more eager to share his company, but it soon left his mind, even when Darren ran towards him as though he was an old friend he hadn't met for many years.

"Nova!" cried Darren. His heart raced, but he didn't know whether it was in panic or yearning. Either way, there was no turning away from him. He wound down the driver's side window.

"Hey Darren, get in!" called Nova. "This car's nice and warm." But then he felt his cheeks blushing underneath his fur. *Did I really just do that?* he thought. He went to try and correct himself and almost stomped on the accelerator, but then he thought...no, he couldn't do it. He couldn't just speed off and leave him like that. It just wasn't in him to. Besides, the vehicle had warmed up by now. And as Darren rushed towards him, nearly slipping over on the way, Nova was sure he would never be able to forget the look on his face now.

"I'm so glad you came!" beamed Darren. "You're early too!" Nova turned on the car's dashboard light, and he had to admit as he wound the window up that he wasn't disappointed with what he saw. Darren was a slender orange and white fox whose rectangular glasses glinted in the street and dashboard lights, casting a glow on his blue eyes. Rather than casual clothing, he had this time come out with a leather jacket with a blue shirt underneath, as well as a pair of black jeans that hugged his figure and left his thick and bushy tail to follow him like a shadow. And he looked so happy to see him again, it was as though he'd found paradise on Earth. Nova laid eyes on him for a long moment, and he could no longer deny it – this fox, whoever he was, whatever he was thinking, actually looked very handsome, somehow even more so than he had the last time they'd met. His mouth went very dry and he wasn't at all sure what to say until Darren's voice interrupted the silence.

"Aww, you're such a darling!" cooed Darren. "That's so sweet of you."

"What's so sweet of me?" said Nova, utterly confused. But then he abruptly realised what he meant. "Oh, you mean –"

"How did you know my favourite chocolates and flowers?" beamed Darren.

"Just a blind guess." said Nova bashfully as he grabbed them from the rear seats and presented them to the fox, who graciously took them. "Uh, I suppose you know why I'm here." Darren stared into his eyes, looking as nervous as he felt.

"Yes I do." he replied hesitantly. He looked like he wanted to get more out but was far too nervous to.

"Well then," said Nova, his face twisting into a painful smirk, "let's make a go of it, shall we?"

"I don't see why not." chirped Darren. "We're already getting off to a good start. The last car I travelled in had flats, while this one...just what I needed on a winter's day." Nova could feel his heart beginning to tighten and his mouth drying up again. He hit another mental block, but the awkward silence was suddenly interrupted when he suddenly heard loud music playing. Not from outside, but from his car stereo. What's more, he immediately recognised it as one of Epsilon's CDs. The booming basslines, the rich guitars, the whimsical vocals...they were how Epsilon had described the genre of Rock, but it was a genre he had never found himself as fond of as he was.

"Nova?"

"I'm so sorry, Darren. My younger brother must have left one of his CDs in there again." Panicking, he tried to turn the stereo off, but Darren caught his hand paw.

"Hey, don't turn it off!" he protested. "I love this band!"

“You do?” said Nova curiously.

“I’ve been into this band since I was a tiny cub.” smiled Darren. “I’ve got all of their albums.”

“It’s not the sort of music I go for, but okay, I’ll leave it on for you.” replied Nova as the song faded into the next track. “I’ve really got to stop him doing that.”

“It’s not a problem.” said Darren kindly. “The album is *So Long Ma, I’m Going Places* by Plantations, so that’s okay by me.”

“Um...I’m assuming it is.” said Nova. “I don’t have the cover in the car. It’s still in the flat somewhere.” But sure enough, he could see Darren beginning to nod his head in time with the melody. *At least that’s one disaster averted.* He thought to himself, looking around at the many creatures navigating the outside of the railway station as he drove away, the snowfall starting to send a chill through him.

“So, where shall we go?” inquired Darren. Nova suddenly found himself flustered and almost stopped the car.

“I thought you might know.” he said uneasily.

“To tell you the truth,” admitted Darren sheepishly, “I didn’t really think about it.”

“I’m sure we can come up with something.” proposed Nova. He thought hard. He remembered what he’d said about his love for the arts and how he had always wanted to visit a particular museum that wasn’t very far from there. Indeed, one of the first signs he saw when he came out read *Kelvin Grove Art Museum*. He thought it was as good a stop as any. He’d visited once before when he’d gone there during an investigation concerning a drug smuggling operation, and he hadn’t forgotten the many sights he had seen, even if his visit had only been brief.

“If I recall it right, you said it was called the Kelvin Grove, yes?” said Nova. Darren’s reaction made him think of a young cub being given a pawful of their favourite sweets.

“Yes, that’s it!” crowed Darren. “Going there would be a dream come true!”

“I don’t see why not.” replied Nova. “Who am I to deny you a pleasure like that?” However, the moment he’d spoken these words, he rebuked himself for them. *Oh, I shouldn’t have said that.* he thought, gritting his teeth and bowing his head when Darren turned to look out of the passenger’s side window.

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They arrived after what felt like only a mere few minutes, but even though night had fallen, the building, which Nova thought looked like a manor or a mansion, was still packed with visitors and it was a struggle to find anywhere to park. Nova thought that it was an unusual place to want to be taken for a first date, but he supposed that it at least wasn’t a strip club or a seedy bar like the ones he’d visited during his present investigation. He wondered for a moment what would happen if any of his colleagues or any of those he had interacted with in past and present searches happened to be there, but he tried to avoid dwelling on it, wanting the time to pass as quickly as possible.

Nova killed the engine and he could sense that Darren could barely contain his excitement. His eyes were wide open and his tail was swishing to and fro so quickly that Nova thought he might accidentally knock him over if he got too close. Once they got into the foyer, there was no denying that it was no wonder Darren wanted so much to come here. He was utterly floored by the sight before him.

“Whoa, Darren,” exclaimed Nova, “you should have told me more about this place!”

“I know.” beamed Darren. “Isn’t it just astounding?” *He’s got me there.* thought Nova as he looked around. He’d only reached the main entrance hall and already he was finding himself gazing in wonder at the many exhibits before him. Many chandeliers hung from the ceiling and through the many archways either side of him he could see various statues of figures throughout history, mythical creatures said to have existed many aeons ago, along with many beautiful paintings that symbolised all manner of different scenes. Beside these were plenty of different natural exhibits in metal and glass cages. There were so many doorways all around that he had no idea which was the best one to go through first. *Look at this place. It’s not very hard to see why he wanted to be brought here.* he thought to himself. But before he could take in any more of the sights, he found himself following Darren down one of the many corridors.

"Hey Nova, come on!" called Darren.

"Let me guess," said Nova dryly, "you feel like a cub in a sweet shop, right?"

"You know I do." said Darren brightly.

"I know it's kind of an odd place to bring you." said Nova. "I mean, it was the first place I could think of."

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, Nova." smiled Darren. "I've always wanted to come here, and look what you did. I'm not about to run away in tears. Not unless you've got some feathers to tickle me with."

"Why don't we just save that for later?" said Nova, his voice faltering. The look in Darren's eyes was one that showed clear affection. He didn't know whether to feel elated or uneasy. "Where do you want to go first?"

"I was thinking we check out the Dutch Art Gallery first."

"That's in the other direction."

"Oh, of course. Silly me! Come on, take me there, big guy." *Big guy?* he thought, wading through the foyer. *Nobody with the exception of my brother has ever called me that in an affectionate manner.* They went through another of the corridors, just inside which were two majestic paintings of fields and meadows. For a moment he found himself wishing he had brought Epsilon along, despite the reason why he was there. *They don't have anything about The Jack Bros. Show here,* he thought wistfully, *but Epsilon would have liked all this. There's a chance he has a school trip to it on the horizon, but I cannot be sure.*

Darren gazed in wonder as he wandered through the west wing. Nova too found himself taken in, but when the fox posed in front of a painting of the Northern Lights and beckoned him forth, he found himself feeling uncertain.

"You okay, Nova?" asked Darren.

"Oh, it's nothing." said Nova. "Come on – let's see your camera."

"I think we've got one already." smiled Darren, pointing at the security camera aimed directly at him.

"Well, fancy that." grinned Nova.

"Let's give the security guards and these other creatures a nice treat, shall we?" Nova felt his senses awaken on this utterance, but the penny quickly dropped when he realised he just meant he wanted to pose with him. *Relax, Nova.* he told himself. *This isn't the kind of man who would stoop as low as to steal art. It's clear he likes you, but if you're not the man of his dreams, then what are you? Just another man, really.* Trying to put this to the back of his mind, he stepped forward as Darren pulled out his mobile phone and snapped a photograph as the two shared gleeful smiles. He had to admit when he showed it to him that it was a moment he wouldn't soon forget. *I wish Epsilon could see me now.*

"So Nova, a little more about yourself, if you may." inquired Darren. *I hope this isn't going to cost me.*

"Ah, I never did go into very much detail when you asked me before." replied Nova. He didn't know whether it was just his senses threatening to go into overdrive or simply the result of his own past experiences, but despite feeling trusting towards him, he didn't want to reveal too much. *Here goes nothing.* "You may have heard a rumour or two, and it is correct. I'm a private investigator. I don't think I have to tell you what kind of things that has me doing, as you can most likely imagine what it has me doing. It has its perks, even if I see society's seedy side. My boss says she hardly ever sees anyone get into the game as young as I did. When I'm not on the road, I spend a lot of my time with my younger brother."

"What kind of things do you do with him?" chirped Darren. Nova noticed his tail starting to sweep in his direction in his walk.

"Just what you'd expect if anything." replied Nova. "We get along like two best friends. He loves this program called *The Jack Bros. Show*. You heard of it?"

"I can't say that I have." admitted Darren. "It sounds like you've got a thrilling life ahead of you. It's like one of those detective dramas you hear so much about. What case are you investigating right now?" Nova had half expected this question, but it still threatened to penetrate his subconscious shield.

"Sorry Darren, I can't tell you that." said Nova. "I'm not allowed to disclose that information. I'm sure you understand."

"Yeah, I get it." conceded Darren. Nova studied his face, which had a small sliver of a smirk.

"Hey, I'm not Inspector Gadget if that's what you're thinking." smirked Nova. "That guy's a bumbler if there ever was one."

"Yeah." said Darren with a nod, pulling him into a cuddle when they stopped at another of the paintings. "I've got you, haven't I? My favourite investigator here in my arms." *I suppose you do.* he thought. Despite pangs of discomfort, he couldn't deny it – it actually felt rather pleasant to be in his company, even if in a way he often referred to as up close and personal. But he was getting the impression that it was him who interested him more than the pieces draped around the gallery. There existed no way in his mind to derail this without causing him upset, so he saw no way to go but seeing how this played out.

After a moment, Nova was heard to quietly sigh to himself, and though Darren's ears twitched, he didn't appear to have paid it any mind.

"Come on, let's go and check out the rest of this place." proposed Darren. "I could spend a whole day here, but, you know."

"You mean to say I should have picked you up earlier." Nova heard himself say. But he quickly realised what he'd said. *Did I just say that or was that a very audible thought?* he asked himself.

"The time of day doesn't matter, Nova." said Darren kindly. "We can do this any time we want."

"Yes, I suppose you're right." agreed Nova.

"Come on, let's check out what else we've got here." Nova thought he was going to run to the next attraction he saw, but instead he ambled slowly, carefully examining each piece of artwork he came across. But then, an item in the next room caught his attention. He read the sign overhead aloud to himself. *French Art.* No matter where this evening went, any claims about Darren being unrefined would hold no water. He beckoned Nova over and the grin on his face made him think of a young schoolboy who had just won marbles in an arm wrestling match.

"Is that one of Van Gogh's?" asked Nova, spotting Darren gazing in wonder at an oil painting of a windmill in a field overlooking Paris.

"I can see we both know our art." grinned Darren. "Really wish I could buy a copy and hang it up. This is beautiful!" He turned to him with glowing eyes. *Here it comes.* he thought, his heart sinking. *He's going to compliment me and compare me to the painting.* But the compliment never came. Instead, when Darren went to open his mouth, he found himself distracted by another piece, which turned out to be Van Gogh's portrait of Alexander Reid.

"Now this guy was a big player when he was alive." commented Darren. "He was –" Before he could finish, there came a brief melody from the loudspeakers before a booming voice echoed throughout the premises.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls," announced the masculine voice, "the museum will close in five minutes. Please make your way to the exit. Thank you." Darren's face fell, and Nova felt a moment's guilt. *I should have taken the day off.* he thought.

"Aw, already?" pouted Darren.

"Afraid so." said Nova.

"And I was gonna take you to the restaurant downstairs too." *He's really serious about this.* thought Nova.

"That's alright, boyo." replied Nova kindly. "I'll bring you back here another time and we'll get to see more then. That sound alright?"

"Yeah, that does help." Darren said, crestfallen as he followed the other creatures out, Nova sticking close behind. "I just wish I could have got to show you more."

"We can remedy that next time." replied Nova.

"Whenever that next time is, it'll be amazing to do it with you." And as they reached the foyer, each glancing briefly at the exhibits they passed, Nova turned the events of the visit over in his mind. Brief though they were, he wasn't at all sure about this. Did he want to do this? Was he ready for a lover? He didn't think he could say yes to those questions. *I don't think I can do this.* he thought, looking sadly at the fox while he was distracted by a statue of a now extinct species. *But I can't just jilt him. That's the worst thing I could do to him.* But then he came to a quick decision. *Alright, Nova. Let's take him to somewhere else he might like.*

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There was a thick layer of snow coating the land and the air temperature had plunged so far that even the thick winter parka he pulled out of his car's boot wasn't enough to warm him up. He thought he was lucky he could still start the car again and even with the heating at full blast and their coatings of fur, it wasn't enough to prevent them from shivering.

When he finally left the car park, he looked around to see if he could find a restaurant. Now that he thought about it, he didn't know what kind he would appreciate. But before he could turn it over in his mind further, he spotted an Italian restaurant a few minutes later. And it looked quite respectable.

"Ooh, *Il Dolce Pipistrello*?" smiled Darren. "How did you know I love Italian food?"

"Uh, just a very fortunate guess, I think." said Nova bashfully, feeling his cheeks blush.

"You've been so good to me today." said Darren. "I can't believe I didn't think of meeting you earlier."

"Well, we're here, Darren." announced Nova. "It's my treat." He killed the engine and followed Darren into the restaurant, taking their seats at one of the window tables. The building was spacious, the cold stone floor chilling Nova's foot paws, and had a large buffet canteen in the centre. It had a homely feel to it, the walls adorned with many framed pictures and the tables and chairs not far off the appearance of the ones he had seen in the houses he'd been to in the city. Darren ordered a spaghetti and tofu balls dish with a cherry cream soda while Nova chose a four cheese pizza and a lemonade, but Nova couldn't help but notice the vulpine waiter staring as he walked away with their order. He paid him no mind and turned his attention back to Darren.

"This has been a nice day. I thank you." grinned the fox.

"It's alright." replied Nova. "You're getting what you wanted, even with the snow."

"We're fine. That thing's got snow treads." said Darren. "Maybe next time, we'll get to do a little more. But no matter what we do, it's a dream being with you."

"It is?" said Nova, aghast. He hadn't expected such a statement so soon. What's more, he noticed the same waiter staring at them again as he took an order from another table, this time sneaking in a scowl. *What's his problem?* he thought.

"It is. It wouldn't have been the same without you, big guy."

"You really believe that?" inquired Nova, unsure quite how to respond to these heartfelt words.

"Sure I do." said Darren.

"Well, maybe you could tell me some more about what makes you tick."

"Oh, that's true, actually! You answered my questions, now it's my turn, right?" Nova nodded. "You know already that I like my art and classical music. That's no secret to anyone who has known me for long enough. There's a little more too. I'm into rock as well and I'm a big fan of Trans Siberian Orchestra, and I'd love a chance to come and see them live. I work at a sandwich bar and that doesn't take me to as many places as your job takes you, but it's still a job nonetheless. And, uh...well, that's about all I can think of for now." He trailed off, looking as though he regretted his choice of words. It took a moment for Nova to respond, and he found he had to really steel himself to speak.

"I can see we're going to get along very well." said Nova, hearing his voice coming out sounding awkward. *Oh, boy. I'm never going to hear the end of this if my colleagues find out.*

"We're reading each other like maps." smirked Darren.

"It seems we are." said Nova. "I get a lot of people admiring me for my job. The truth is, if they had my job they wouldn't get out of bed."

"I know I wouldn't." admitted Darren. "I don't know how you have the strength to do that every day."

"I've got no choice."

"I really wish I could help you with the investigation you're on now." said Darren solemnly. *So did I. thought Nova, wanting to tell him this right there and then. But I'm best working alone. That way, there's no probability of you getting hurt.* He noticed a family of skunks with two young cubs coming in and sitting at a table near them, both parents showing them affectionate smiles. He returned a polite smirk, quickly turning back to the fox.

"You might say you helped in your own way." he said. But then he felt his cheeks blushing. *I've got to get away from here.* he thought, panic gripping him. He looked around for the restrooms, spotting a sign for them just next to the kitchens. *There!*

"I'm sorry Darren, I've got to answer nature's call." he said, standing up just as the waiter returned with their food.

"Spaghetti and tofu balls and four cheese pizza?" asked the waiter.

"That's us! Thanks!" chirped Darren. "Come back soon, alright sweetie?" The waiter looked bemused. "No, not you. I meant him." The waiter simply nodded and returned to the kitchen, while Nova turned back to him, looking rather regretful.

"Of course." He headed into the men's toilets, but as he looked back, he couldn't help but notice Darren looking crestfallen as he picked at his food, not once eating any. As he stood at one of the urinals, his mind's waters were deep enough to swim in. He looked at his reflection in the mirrors above the sinks afterwards, the warm water soaking the fur on his hand paws doing nothing to distract him from his racing mind. *What am I doing?* he asked himself. *Even if I did need to go, I shouldn't have done that. If I just leave him now...well, either option has its problems. I should just leave now. This doesn't have to go any further than it already has. He can afford the bill. But he felt a surge of guilt from this thought. I can't do that to him. Leaving him now would be worse. I can't have a shattered heart on my conscience.*

With that, he knew exactly what he was going to do. With renewed determination, he dried his hand paws, but as another creature came in, what he heard shocked him to the core. What was going on? He kept the door open a crack.

"Well look who's here, Glenda!" jeered another voice.

"What are you doing here?" said Darren, his voice heightened with protest.

"I come here for a meal with my wife, and I find you here stirring the pot?" sneered the other voice.

"What are you talking about?"

"I knew I'd find you in a place like this." said the voice, his voice dripping with contempt. "I saw him."

"Who?"

"I saw your boyfriend. I can't believe you actually have the nerve to show your face around here. I know what your kind are."

"But –"

"Don't deny it, Darren. Harry told me everything."

"How do you...how do you know about him?"

"I'm his friend. But he's too stupid to see he's let you pollute his business."

"I do a good job. What does it matter if I'm gay?"

"Hey, lay off him!" cried another male voice. "He's just minding his own business!"

"Don't try and be tough with me, pal!" sneered the man. "And you – I know what you fags get up to. You're sick in the head."

"What do you mean?" said Darren, by then sounding tearful.

"I think you'd better leave these premises now, sir." snapped one of the waiters. "We don't tolerate this kind of behaviour on our premises." But the rabbit simply ignored him. Then there came the sound of him hawking and spitting.

"I'm sure your *boyfriend* is somewhere waiting for another todger to pull. Eat up." Anger and utter disgust pulsing through his nerves, Nova had half a mind to walk out and confront him. But one look through the door's peep hole and he could see him coming towards the men's toilets. He saw that he was a light blue rabbit with several different tattoos inked into his fur, and this meant he recognised him instantly. *You're not getting away with this.* The door swung open, and the moment he saw him, he instantly stopped where he stood.

"Arnold Jenkins," snapped Nova, gritting his teeth between words, "I thought you might still not have learned what's good for you." It looked as though Arnold was going to taunt him, but the moment he got closer to him, casting his body in his shadow, his courage faltered and he started to cower. *You're even more pathetic than you were the first time I saw you.* he thought.

"Okay, okay." said Arnold meekly. "Just don't hurt me! I don't wanna go back to jail!" But Nova was so furious, he grabbed him by the scruff of his collar, tugging on the fur above it.

"I'm not going to hurt you." snapped Nova, his tone heavy with rage. He could see through the open door when another man came in that Darren's head was turned away and he could only look down at his meal. "But I will be letting your parole officer know about what you did to my Darren."

"*Your* Darren?" he said, sounding flustered. "Oh, oh I didn't realise he was your lover! It was just a bit of banter! That's all!" Nova bared his teeth in a furious snarl.

"What kind of idiot do you think I am, Arnold?" he barked. "That was not banter! A whole seven years behind bars...I can see paying your debt to society has taught you nothing. If you think the parole board will take kindly to this, you've got another thing coming."

"Alright, I get it." said Arnold, Nova noticing him glancing at his large hand paws.

"You know, you are extraordinarily lucky you met me here while I was off duty and not some psycho in a back alley." With that, Arnold slinked out, seemingly eager to get away from Nova as fast as possible.

"Come on, Glenda. Let's get out of here."

"But what about –"

"I don't care." It was a moment before the chatter from the other diners broke the stunned silence as Nova rushed back to the table. The instant he reached it, he saw the pool of phlegm in the centre of what remained of Darren's meal. Nova gritted his teeth.

"Madam, another spaghetti and tofu dish over here." he called to one of the waitresses, a green and gold dragoness. "This one's been tainted. The rabbit who just left spat in it."

"Of course." she said, whisking away the dish. "We saw what happened. This one's on us...yes Christa?" There came a faint voice, but Nova couldn't make out any words. "Oh...the head chef's just let me know another one's ready. It'll be with you right away."

"Don't." said Darren weakly. "I'm fine."

"Please, just bring it over." insisted Nova. "It would mean a lot. Come on, Darren. You need to eat just like the rest of us."

"Thanks." said Darren weakly. The waitress walked off, while Nova approached Darren gingerly.

"Are you okay, Darren?" he asked. The fox looked up at him, a sombre look in his eyes. He looked distraught, and he could see tears beginning to soak his fur.

"He just...just like that, he –" sniffed Darren.

"He's gone now." said Nova soothingly. "I gave him a piece of my mind in the toilets, so you've got nothing to worry about."

"What if he comes back?"

"I don't think he will. He knows what will happen now that he's broken his parole conditions." He gave Darren his handkerchief and he wiped his eyes. Just then, the waitress returned, using one of her vast wings to fan the smell of the meal.

"Hey foxy, here's your food." said the waitress with a smile.

"Thank you so much." said Nova appreciatively. "It means a lot." The waitress turned to Darren. Evidently she'd overheard their conversation, because she showed the fox a warm smile and laid a hand on his shoulder.

"You've got a good man there, you have." she said. "He really cares about you." As she left for the kitchen, Nova reached out for his hand paw, linking fingers with his.

"Who was that rabbit?" asked the fox. "I mean, he said he was a friend of my boss and you said he was just out of jail." Nova sighed.

"I know I said I couldn't speak to you about cases," he answered, "but you deserve to know about this guy. I helped convict him for assaulting a taxi driver. He nearly killed the guy."

"Why'd he do it?" asked Darren. "Why attack him?"

"He mugged him for his takings. He's just a waster, and a pretty thick one at that. He's already breached his parole conditions once. Come on, the night's still young."

"Okay." said Darren, grabbing his fork. They ate in silence until, after Darren took a drink of his cream soda, he found his voice once more and looked up at Nova.

"I won't lie to you," said Darren meekly, "I was glad to see my big strong batty come back and see some of what he could do." Nova went to respond, but his words caught in his throat. Looking at him again, he realised he was beginning to form a strong bond with the fox. It felt different from friendship. Was this love? The look in Darren's eyes said that this was what he was feeling for him. Gone was the desire to flee, and sprouting was the need to help him recover from this attack. Now, visions of them as lovers began to fill his mind, and all of a sudden, he could feel his heart beginning to race once more. He didn't want to leave his side again, but what could he do from here? Before he could answer him, however, the restaurant's boss, a balding and rather plump human man, stepped into the room and chimed his wine glass.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he cried, "tonight's dance will be starting in just a few minutes. It will be held in the next room, and while the DJ is setting up, you may take a look at the selection of fine wines on the menu. Happy eating!" Darren and Nova turned to each other. Nova showed Darren a warm smile as he dried his eyes.

"So how about it?" proposed Nova. "We can still end this evening on a high."

"Okay. But what about our desserts?"

"We can have them later. It's better we don't do this on full stomachs."

"Yeah, that's a good idea. What will you have?"

"I took a look at the menu and thought I might have a mint sundae. I saw a chocolate and raspberry cake you might like."

"I like the sound of that!" And with that, they finished the last of their meals, ordered their desserts and headed for the dance floor paw in paw.

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Darren and Nova got into it quickly, the pounding and captivating music serving to call them forth as though they were soldiers about to be deployed to their next mission. Locking eyes with each other, they followed each other's steps and movements, each allowing the other to show the way. It was as though the other couples on the floor were just fragments of his mind, for at that very moment Nova found himself imagining the dance floor to be the ballroom of a whimsical palace, as though he and Darren had at that moment been transported into the world contained within a fairy tale. Indeed, he felt like he'd found his king, though he did not need a crown.

As one song flowed into another, he found himself moving along with it, eager to do whatever it took to shake off Darren's memory of what had happened earlier. It seemed to be working, for Darren's eyes glowed with affection, desire increasingly interspersing in between love. At that moment, all semblance of objection vanished from Nova's mind. Now, rather than wanting to run away, he saw this as just the start of a beautiful relationship. Indeed, when the next song finished, he heard delighted cheering from all around him as the bat and the fox shared a long and tender hug.

Nova could feel his heartbeat increasing in pace, while Darren showed him an affectionate smile and a needing stare. Now that he thought about it, he didn't know why he hadn't simply taken the first opportunity he'd had at the lonely hearts club despite the reason he was there to begin with. But before the next song could begin, they heard a voice calling out to them. It was the dragoness waitress again.

"Hey you two," she called, "your desserts are ready." They slowed to a cease. Nova sensed excitement forming in the fox's body. For a moment he thought he was going to run back to the table as quickly as he possibly could, but he simply allowed Nova to slowly follow him there instead. Looking at the desserts, he felt his mouth beginning to water.

"Nova, you really shouldn't have," said Darren. "The meal and the museum were enough, but now you're just spoiling me."

"I keep telling you, foxy," smiled Nova, "it's my treat to you." But he mentally stopped when he used the word foxy. *Did I just call him that?* he thought as Darren spooned the first piece of the cake into his mouth. *I've never felt so alive!* Nova took a taste of his ice cream, and before he knew it, had wolfed down several spoonfuls.

"I think I know what to get for my big strong batty next time," simpered Darren. Nova didn't respond until he'd cleared half of the bowl.

"Whoa, that's good," he said gladly. "Maybe they still sell it at the convenience store down the road from the flat."

"I'd go to somewhere more than that to get you a present, Nova," said Darren. Nova went to speak, but Darren beat him to it. "I'm really enjoying this too. I'm so glad I let you pick for me."

"I'm pleased you're enjoying it," said Nova warmly. "Chocolate and raspberries are a lovely mix."

"It's like you know everything about me," said Darren between another mouthful of the cake and raspberry. "I love chocolate like Popeye likes spinach. And you knew."

"Another lucky guess," said Nova as he feverishly polished off what remained of his ice cream.

"Stop saying that!" cried Darren. "I'm starting to think we're like a pair of underwear."

"A pair of underwear is only one item, Darren," Nova pointed out.

"Oh. Um, two peas in a pod then," Darren corrected himself, eating up the rest of the cake in several quick bites. "I don't know about you, but I'm stuffed."

"Me too." admitted Nova. "I would say I ate like a pig, but I don't think that guy over there would like it if I said that too loud." He gestured to a family of pigs at the far side of the room, who fortunately didn't appear to have heard him in the midst of their own conversation. "On that note, shall we go?"

"Of course." said Darren. Nova paid and they made their way out, and it occurred to him only then that he hadn't once paid attention to what was outside. The sudden burst of cold threatened to shake him off his foot paws. In fact, they could barely walk. What began as light snowfall had turned into a blizzard, and the snow was about one foot deep. Darren tried to come towards him but fell flat on his face, landing with his arms outstretched.

"Hey look! I've acquired my very own snow angel!" grinned Nova, making Darren laugh. The sound was music to his ears, its pitch serving to capture his very mind. Darren recomposed himself and clambered back to his foot paws with Nova's help. Once he was back up, they came gradually closer to one another before they met in a tender embrace. Despite the freezing temperatures, it felt like he was sitting in front of a warm fireplace. The snowflakes hitting his face didn't matter in the slightest. For a moment they stood there, sharing each other's warmth, company and yearning. Darren's voice was the first to break the silence.

"I don't know how to thank you for tonight." said Darren.

"I'm not going to lie to you," said Nova, "I was having doubts whether I wanted to do this. But now, those doubts are long gone. Just think of this as a totally normal night."

"I'm glad to know that." said Darren. "But Nova...why would you want me of all creatures?" Nova was surprised by this question.

"What are you saying?" he asked.

"I mean, you chased that rabbit away when he started on me." said Darren. "I couldn't even talk back to him. I'm only a worker at a café, and you're all over the place in your investigator job. I don't know if I could offer even half as much as what you can." For a moment, Nova felt sorry for him, pitying his lack of confidence. But then a sly idea crept into his head.

"You want to know what my answer to that is?"

"What?" asked Darren. Nova's response was to pull him closer and lock his lips onto his in a kiss that, from the moment they linked with his, served to send him into a bliss unlike any he had known for a very long time. It was a few seconds before Darren let himself be overcome, and though it was brief, the taste of his lips combined with what small traces remained of their desserts proved to be a very surprising amalgam. They parted, gazing longingly into each other's eyes. Nova knew that he didn't want the end to come for a very long time yet. He felt as though he had always known the fox, and now, he could no longer imagine his life without him being a part of it.

"Does that answer your question?" inquired Nova.

"That tells me everything I wanted to know." said Darren.

"What do you say to coming home with me tonight?" proposed Nova. "Even with the snow treads on the car, going through these impenetrable roads will be next to impossible. The roads will have been gritted by the time daylight befalls us. I've got plenty of hot chocolate in the flat for you as well." He studied Darren's face, and he lit up like the street lights all around them.

"How could I ever refuse?" beamed Darren. And linking hand paws, they made their way back, ready to advance to the next chapter of their very own winter's tale.

The End

