

Pleasure And Pain

Taylor frowned as he stared once more at his phone's screen. The time there read 9:17am and shed its glow across the otter's face. His furrowed brow cast a shadow as he tilted his head up and glanced at the door.

Lucas was late getting home from work. That wasn't unusual in and of itself; Taylor had grown quite accustomed to the fox making it back to the apartment around six in the morning. But to be *this* late was something else. "Maybe I should have given him more warning," he mumbled to himself.

"What's that, babe?" came the call from the kitchen.

A glance over showed Mike leaning on the counter, a large mug of coffee clutched tight in the towering crocodile's hand. He looked concerned, and Taylor had to force a smile before he shook his head. "Just wondering if I should have told Lucas about our plan a couple weeks ago instead of just now," he replied at last. "Or maybe just on a day he's not headed out to work. Give him a chance to get used to the idea, you know?"

Mike sighed quietly and shook his head as he made his way over to the otter. The mug was set down on the counter as he passed it, freeing up both arms to wrap Taylor up in a tight little hug. "That fox's got a lot of shit to sort out in his own damn head, no matter what we do," he said and kissed the top of the otter's head. "You've done right by him. You're still doing right by him. Don't worry."

"This just isn't like him," Taylor muttered into the croc's chest as he leaned in closer. "Lucas is a sucker for being on time. He's never late for anything. It's almost neurotic. He hates staying back late at work and he doesn't like being around his boss down here anywhere near as much as the old one, so why's he not home yet?"

"You gave him a lot to think about, you know," Mike pointed out as he drew back to stare down into Taylor's eyes. He held that stare for a moment as he smiled. "Poor thing probably just needs some time to himself. Couple hours to walk around, stretch his legs--"

"Instead of his backside," Taylor mumbled to himself.

Mike laughed as he shook his head and continued, "--and get his head on right. You can't expect him to be completely okay with this whole situation with what he's been through, can you?"

One of Taylor's eyebrows perked up as he cocked his head. "You sound like you're defending what he did."

Both of Mike's hands lifted as if to ward the otter off as he shook his head. "Nope. Not taking that bait, rudderbutt. You know how I feel about the stories you told me about Lucas. But you *also* know what you told me about the guy he ran off with. Sounds like karma bit him in the ass already. Can't blame me for holding a bit of sympathy for him, can you?"

The otter sighed as he shook his head. That was Mike all over. He was ever the rational one. "No," he finally admitted with another shake of his head. "I guess I can't. You're infuriating when you're right, do you know that?"

One of the crocodile's eyeridges twitched upwards as he smirked. "Yeah, but I'm still hot enough that it doesn't change your mind about moving in with me, does it?"

The light, open-pawed blow to the crocodile's chest barely even moved the larger male, but Taylor chuckled nonetheless. "Alright, so you're just infuriating all the time. Sound better?"

"So long as we still get that house together, I'm fine with it," Mike replied. He leaned down and planted a gentle kiss on the tip of the otter's nose as he stepped back and grabbed at his mug. "Don't you worry about the fox. I'm sure he's doing just fine. We, in the meantime, have a lovely little three bedroom house to go inspect."

Mike was right, and Taylor knew it. They had scheduled the inspection at ten, and if they were going to make it they'd have to leave within about fifteen minutes. "Alright, alright. You finish your coffee. I'll go double-check the address and make sure everything's ready."

"Mmm-hmm," was all the response that Taylor received, what with the mouthful of coffee making it harder for the croc to offer anything more. The otter left him in the kitchen as he headed to his computer and slumped down in the chair. Mike was right. Lucas probably just hadn't wanted to come home yet. He was probably out on one of his walks, trying to figure things out. Right then, he had more important things to worry about.

Lucas was probably just fine.

Fine was definitely not the word that the fox would have used.

The pain that roused Lucas from the darkness of oblivion was familiar. It was a burn that stretched from beneath his tail right up his spine, sending lines of agony searing right through every inch of his body. It was obscene in its pervasiveness, and it was all-encompassing in its reach.

Its name was Damian.

Lucas' eyes opened wide, unfocused and blinded by sudden light as he struggled to scabble away from the pain that split him. Every motion was futile; bonds about his wrists and ankles kept him strapped to some sort of cold, metal surface. The latter kept his legs spread wide, though that wouldn't have mattered to the horse between them. Massive hands gripped at his shoulders and pulled him down, causing the restraints to cut into his wrists and ankles even as that equally-massive equine shaft plunged deep into his body again.

The fox's whole body arched off the surface — table? Board? Floor? — as the insufficiently-lubricated length of flesh split him open. He felt that broad equine head force his insides apart around it, and any pleasure that Lucas might have derived from the penetration was drowned completely out by the agony of the insertion. His scream echoed over tight, close walls.

"Good morning, sweetheart," came the familiar voice from over Lucas, and his eyes focused just in time to catch a streak of brown come crashing down toward him. The closed fist snapped his head to the side and Lucas found himself able to taste fresh blood as his teeth split his lips under the blow. New pain in his jaw marked two teeth's launch from his muzzle, and they clattered across the floor just out of Lucas' view. "Sleep well?"

All Lucas could do in response was groan in pain as he felt tears well up in his eyes. A wriggle from Damian's hips shifted that titanic length buried in the fox's backside, and it provided just enough sensation to allow Lucas to focus his eyes after the strike. "Urgh," was all he could manage.

Lucas couldn't remember how he'd gotten there. It was more than the pain in his face and in his backside... and his hip, and his chest, and his back, as he took a quick mental inventory. He couldn't remember *anything* about... was it last night? How long had he been out? He'd been at work, and there'd been the coyote brothers and the bear, and... and...

He jerked up slightly, only for a meaty, open-handed slap to slam into the side of his head and send him back to whatever he was strapped to. "Squeeze that dick all you like, Lucas," purred Damien above him. "Just don't get uppity. You know how I like you. *Docile.*"

"What—" was as far as Lucas managed to get before the hand came back again in another punch that just about dislocated the fox's jaw. He cried out in pain, and the voice tapered into a whimper as he sank in against the... what was it? Table? Bed?

“And *silent*,” Damien growled. He bucked forward again, and Lucas gnashed his lip with the new gap in his teeth. It took everything in him not to cry out as he shook with pain. “Christ, Lucas. It’s only been a few months. I put *years* of work into you. You forget how to treat me already?”

It took everything in Lucas to not reply and not to struggle. His whole body jerked again as Damien thrust in again, then again. The horse’s massive shaft pushed into the fox with such ease that Lucas had to wonder how long he’d been violated while unconscious. It bore pain with each and every stroke, but it wasn’t the pain of his body resisting it. It was the pain of a body unable to heal. Of wounds constantly re-inflicted.

Behind Lucas, the horse huffed and groaned in appreciation. Both of his hands shifted to Lucas’ fuzzy hips to squeeze roughly, and the fox jerked and bit his tongue to keep a cry of pain from slipping out. Something was broken for sure.

He suspected it was everything.

It seemed that he’d come around near the end, at least. Buried memories were dredged to the surface with Damien’s regrettably familiar rutting. Each sound and feel from the horse implied that he was near his peak. Eager for it to be over, Lucas struggled to lift his rump and push back against the horse’s broad shaft.

“Yeah, that’s it, boy,” Damien hissed. “See? Hrrf... I knew it... I *knew* you missed me...” He leaned back on one long thrust and brought his hand down hard on Lucas’ rump. The swat came with enough force to slam Lucas back against what he’d come to see as a metal table.

His vision crossed however as Damien grabbed his tail and wrenched him back along the horse’s cock. Pain shot like lightning up Lucas’ spine, and he couldn’t help but howl out in agony. He braced himself for another punch to the face, but reprieve came in the form of Damien’s orgasm. Lucas’ cry of pain was drowned out by the equine’s roar of exultation, and Lucas felt the rush of his ex’s fluids once more within his body.

Tears ran down his face. They matted the fur of his muzzle as he was ground into the table again, the hand on his tail left there to keep it tugged sharply, painfully up. The taste of blood mingled with the semi-familiar taste of Damien’s malehood as Lucas felt his whole body shake with sobs. He squeezed his eyes shut as he lay there and took the horse’s load, spilling more tears down his face as Damien continued to spill inside him.

The worst part was how much tighter Damien squeezed at him. It was like every quiet sob and every shed tear only pushed the horse harder. It was like he fed on Lucas’ suffering and pain; like it only heightened his pleasure. Lucas wanted to deny him. He wanted to cut him off. He wanted to give Damien no satisfaction.

And yet, held there under the horse’s more powerful arms, his body beaten and broken and bound, he hadn’t the strength. He couldn’t resist, because there was no point. Not anymore. No point again. Everything he’d escaped — everything he’d fled from — was back again and it was even worse than he remembered it.

Lucas couldn’t keep the gasp silent when Damien quickly pulled out of him. That flared horsecock left his tailring gaping and swollen, and the sudden emptiness punctuated with the drooling of Damien’s spent load drooling out only launched Lucas into fresh sobs. His muzzle hung open, a silent scream; a plead for mercy that wouldn’t come.

He twitched as he felt a pair of fingers roughly pushing up and stroking over his sheath. The fox hadn’t even considered his own malehood as Damien had taken him. The horse, after all, so rarely took notice of it. He was somewhat gratified that he was still fully tucked within his sheath. Lucas had always been a bit of a size queen; it had been part of the original draw toward the horse. Even unconscious, his body had found no pleasure in Damien’s rough treatment.

Damien, obviously, was not impressed. “What, they give you bigger guys working at that place?” he muttered as he roughly groped at the fox’s sheath. He chuckled as Lucas gave a weak cry of pain. “Don’t suppose it matters much. It’s not like this little thing gets any attention, does it? Hmph.”

His other hand came down in a sharp slap across the fox’s backside, and he twitched against the pain even as he bit his tongue to keep from giving that pain a voice. That, he reminded himself firmly, was Damien’s goal. He wanted to be in control. Anything Lucas didn’t give him as a victory. Anything he failed to get from the fox was a victory.

He caught the scowl on the equine’s face though, and grit his teeth once more as that large hand once more crashed down against his rump. He thrilled inwardly at Damien’s surprise and frustration, but that thrill quickly faded to nothing as the horse began to smile. “Heh... maybe I *did* do some good, huh? Look at you, takin’ it like a champ. I’m almost proud of you.”

Lucas wasn’t ready for the sudden, forceful penetration of four of Damien’s fingers though, and it was surprise as much as pain that saw him cry out again as they hooked into him and dragged him against his straps by his cumsoaked tailhole. “But how can I be proud of you, slut? You’ve forgotten the most important lesson I taught you.”

The horse’s other meaty hand gripped the back of Lucas’ head all of a sudden, and with a fistful of headfur and hair he drove the fox’s muzzle hard down against the table. Lucas could only gasp as he tasted fresh blood in his muzzle, his vision marred by stars from the force of the impact.

The motion repeated as Damien pulled his head back up again, almost far enough to strain the fox’s bonds before he was wrenched down against the metal table once more. “You belong to *me*, Lucas,” he hissed as he lifted the fox’s head for another blow. “You are *mine*!”

When Lucas’ head hit the table again, he yipped as he accidentally bit his tongue. The bloody taste in his mouth grew stronger as the pain there overwrote for a moment the pain in his head, though it didn’t help mask the next time he was driven down against the table. “Answer me, fox. Who do you belong to?”

Ragged breaths rushed in and out of Lucas’ broken muzzle, but the groggy fox offered no words in response. Damien slammed him down again, and only a groan could issue forth from Lucas. “I said *answer* me. Who do you belong to?”

Again, Lucas couldn’t reply. It wasn’t even that he didn’t want to; shame rushed through whatever of him was conscious enough to recognize it that he’d have given the answer Damien wanted, if only to stop the pain. The thoroughness of the horse’s abuse left him unable to reply, not unwilling.

It was the sweetest mercy Lucas could have asked for when the next blow blacked out his vision, and the fox tumbled into the abyss of unconsciousness.

“Ugh, *Karl*, I told you. We can’t afford for you to run off right now!”

James Carter shifted to press his cell between his cheek and his shoulder as he shuffled one of his arms out of his jacket. The chestnut-furred equine just wanted to slump down in his chair and take a *moment* of rest after a long day, but the juvenile groan from the other end of the call told him there was more to do first. “You’re meant to be running my damn business over there, Karl. You don’t just drop on me that you wanna take a month away, effective immediately!” His voice lowered slightly. “Especially with what we were only *just* talking about.”

The sigh on the other end of the phone line — that of increasingly frustrating manager Karl Halleran — was loud enough and exaggerated enough to cause Carter to jerk away from

his phone. Fortunately, his shoulder moved with him and he kept it pressed against his ear anyway. “C’mon, Jimbo. It’s a family emergency-type thing. I didn’t pick the time, and I’m not the fox causing all this fuss.”

With a grunt of exertion, Carter was able to shift the jacket finally off his body and to the floor. “I... ugh, *fine*. You’re not doing yourself any favors here, Karl. You know what? Lucas knows the business well enough. He can cover for you while you’re gone, and I’ll run him through everything else he’ll need.”

There was a moment of silence, followed by a muffled curse and a loud *thud*. Carter froze in place as he frowned at the phone and slipped it back into his hand. “Karl? You there?”

“Y-yeah, Jimmy. I’m still here!” replied Karl a moment later. The bull’s voice sounded strained. “Sorry, dropped the phone. Can you run that by me again? I thought you said put *Lucas* in charge.”

Carter rolled his eyes. What the hell was Karl’s problem with that fox anyway? “Yeah. That’s what I said. He should be on tonight, right? Put him on. I’ll get him started.”

A cough, quiet from being directed away from the phone’s mic still caused one of Carter’s ears to twitch with irritation. “I’m pretty sure he’s on with a client right now, Jim. Gonna be busy all night; full docket. Can I get him to call you back once he’s all done and cleaned up?”

“Fuckin’... *fine*, Karl. But don’t go anywhere until Lucas makes that call.” One of the horse’s hands curled into a fist and he slammed it down with more force than intended on his desk. “You got that? *Nowhere*.”

“You’re a peach, Jimbo. My personal savior. I’ll get that call ASAP.” The call clicked once as Karl hung up, and suddenly Carter was alone in his office.

He sighed and sagged forward for a moment as he ran a hand over his face. Halleran had only become more obstinate since he’d tried to get the bull to look out for Lucas. Carter made a mental note to start looking for replacement staff in the morning. Halleran had worn out his welcome.

A buzz from Carter’s desk lifted his head for a moment, and he allowed a frustrated groan to rumble out from his throat as he mashed a finger down on the intercom button. “What?” he growled. It took a couple of silent seconds for Carter to realize how he’d sounded, and he heaved another sigh. “Sorry. Sorry about that. What is it?”

“I... is this a bad time, Mister Carter?” came the quiet, male voice on the other end. One of the new boys was on the front counter, covering for poor Sammy.

With a shake of his head, Carter dropped into his chair and poked his computer awake. “Just a bad couple days trying to find the guy who roughed Sam up,” he muttered back. He left out the concern for Lucas’ well-being. Sam’s broken arm was enough to have rilled up all his less experienced boys. Carter didn’t need them panicking. “Whatcha need, kid?”

There was a moment more’s hesitation before the kid’s voice came back again. “Just got a call come through, sir. Asking for the top of the ladder. Won’t accept anyone else.”

“Tell them they can make an appointment with you,” he grumbled back at the speaker. A hand reached up to grasp the computer’s mouse, and he started to pull up the staff records for his Bridgeport operation. “You know the answer to any question they can ask, kid. You’ll do fine.”

“But they’re asking after someone called Lucas, sir. You said if anyone-”

“Put them through to my office *now*,” he snapped, his full attention suddenly on the intercom. “Sorry, kid. Please. Put them through now, *please*.” If it was Damian looking to gloat, maybe Carter could learn something from him. Figure out what he was planning, and how to find Lucas.

The moment the phone on his desk began to flash an alert light, the receiver was in Carter's hand. "James Carter," he said. "What about Lucas?"

"You're the boss?" came the gruff male voice on the other end of the line.

Carter frowned. That wasn't Damian's voice, and it wasn't Lucas' voice. He didn't recognize it at all. "Who is this?"

"The guy Lucas has been living with for the last few months, after you kicked him out of the place you promised him," growled the other male. "Name's Taylor. I want to know where Lucas has gone."

The words sent a sliver of dread right through the horse's chest. "What do you mean, gone?" he asked, as he turned back to his screen and started to pull up the Bridgeport roster. "He's at work. I just spoke to his boss over there... and what do you mean, kicked him out? Living with him?"

This Taylor person kept talking, but Carter barely heard him. His full focus was on the screen in front of him. Karl had told him that Lucas was still living in the apartment Carter had had built into the business. Karl had told him that Lucas was doing just fine. Karl had told him that Lucas was working presently.

Lucas wasn't rostered on.

It wasn't unheard of. Boys were sometimes called in when a particular client spontaneously arrived and was willing to drop a lot of money on a night with them. They didn't have to be booked in advance if the payday was big enough. Lucas might just have been picked up by someone on the fly, and Karl'd had to get him in.

But the bull had said 'full docket' for Lucas. That meant that Lucas had been booked up, which would have showed on the roster. Karl Halleran was a brilliant manager and accountant and he had his flaws, but he would *never* have missed that.

"Shut up for a second," he mumbled into the phone as he scrolled back to the last shift that Lucas had been booked for. "Something's very wrong."

"Oh, you fucking think so?" Taylor snorted as Carter skimmed the record. "He didn't come home this morning. He never stays out this long. He doesn't exactly have an abundance of friends here, and since he doesn't have anywhere else to *stay*... well, I can't see him going out for a random night on the town or anything. This is a bit long for a fucking walk."

Carter ignored the frustrated individual as he located Lucas' last assignment. It was a group deal; something he'd specialized in once upon a time. The details were all there. Large payment, four individuals. A couple of coyotes, a bear...

... and a horse.

"Son of a *bitch*!" Carter's fist hit the desk again, and this time the sound of splintered wood reached his ears. A glance over showed a fist-sized divot in the desk's surface, but he quickly shifted his attention to the computer. Lucas didn't do horses. Not ever. It would have sent up a red flag, unless Halleran had specifically overridden it. Lucas *couldn't* do horses, after what had happened. "He found him."

But Taylor didn't know that. "Who found him?" he snapped, though there was a new note of worry in his voice. "What's going on?"

Carter instead called up the security cam footage for the night, and hissed in frustration when all the cams were covered up. Whatever had gone on in the room was completely obscured. On a hunch, he shifted his view to the camera footage at the same time from the hallway outside the room, but it too was covered. Carter rewound the footage for a couple of minutes, and the horse froze up when the picture was revealed.

The familiar equine figure that he saw through the camera smiled right into the device. He reached into his pocket and withdrew something small, before he reached up and pressed it against the side of the security cam. There was a flash of static for a moment, before the image went dark. "Shit. It's him. It's Damien."

“The fuck have you done?” demanded Taylor. The worry was gone. His tone was all accusatory.

“Forget the blame,” Carter growled as he reached to the floor for his jacket. “Both Lucas and I’ve been set up. You need to give me your phone number right now so I can call you back. I have to grab something from home before I go.”

“The hell I will!” yelled the other male. “I’m not—”

“So I can call you *back* on my cell, on the way to the fucking *airport*,” Carter interrupted him as he started to pull the jacket on. “I need you to tell me everything about Lucas since he got over there. I’ve been taken out of the loop, and that fox is in huge trouble. Leave nothing out. I have to know everything.

“I’ll be on the next flight over.”

When awareness returned to Lucas, he had the good fortune this time to not be subject of Damien’s lusts. The fox kept his eyes closed and his breathing as regular as possible as he remained still. Better, he thought, to not let on that he was awake. He’d tried to play dead for Damien before. There was a fifty-fifty chance that the horse would fall for it. Fifty-fifty was worth it, to avoid Damien’s abuse.

He wasn’t still strapped to the metal table. That much he could tell. Lucas knew he was still naked, but that was okay. You couldn’t be a whore — or be around Damien for long — without growing accustomed to being naked. It did take him a moment to realize that the straps on his wrists and ankles were gone.

Instead, Lucas took stock of himself. Rump sore and sticky, naturally. Damien would have used him whenever he liked while he was out. Breathing was painful. Each breath sent a sharp pain through his chest no matter what he did. A little wriggle of his body to try and shift to a more advantageous position didn’t help. Something was broken, he figured. That wriggle brought new pain from his leg, and he started to lift it to gauge how bad it was.

It was impossible for him to keep the illusion of being unconscious up with the pain that raced up that limb. Lucas immediately doubled over and instinctively gripped at his leg as he cried out. Broken. The leg was definitely broken. When that had happened, he didn’t know. Sometime while he was out, probably.

There wasn’t going to be any way to know how long that even was. His whole face still felt swollen and as he looked around, he found himself in a windowless room that didn’t give him the barest hint of an idea about what time it even was. Days could have passed. Weeks. *Months*. He wouldn’t know. As he started to manage the pain in his leg, a forlorn little whimper slipped out of the fox’s muzzle. Would anyone even know he was gone? Would anyone even care?

Why would they?

His head jerked around to face the door as he heard a loud *thunk* as something was unlocked. Lucas immediately scrambled back in spite of the pain in his leg until he was backed into the furthest corner of his little cell. Above the door, he could see a small camera. Of course. Damien would want to know when he was awake. Damien had to know everything.

And as the door swung open, there indeed was the horse himself. Tall and built, his button-up red shirt tight across his broad chest and the cream slacks only barely able to hold back the titanic shaft beneath them. He smiled and clasped his hands behind his back, all charming and seductive and confident just the way he used to be when they’d met. Before he convinced Lucas to run away with him. Before he showed the monster within.

On some level, Lucas wanted to defy him. He wanted to stand up and spit in his face. He wanted to take everything Damien could dish out and laugh in his face. He wanted to hold the horse's gaze, stare back at him, and make Damien know he had no more power over him.

But still he cowered. Still he kept his eyes away from Damien's. Still he curled in on himself as, unbidden, tears began to form in his eyes. Claustrophobia sank in around him like an oppressive fog, and it crushed the fox down until he did nothing more than whimper meekly from the floor. He could fight. He *would* lose. Submit. Submit, and spare himself. It would give Damien his victory, but at least Lucas knew he'd not be hurt. Not much more, at least. Not enough to kill him.

Probably.

That submission seemed to please Damien. He just watched, and out of the corner of his eye Lucas could see the smile on his face and the bulge in his pants. This, right then and there, was what Damien prized even more than wedging his cock into someone. This was the power that he craved. This was the power he needed. And, as shameful as it was for Lucas to admit to himself, it was the power he once again wielded. Lucas was trapped... Damien was in control. *Master* was in control. He felt sick in a way that had nothing to do with his injuries.

"I'm sorry I had to hit you, sweetie," Damien said, his voice soft and honeyed. "I really am. You've got a pretty face... or, you *had* one. Once you heal up, maybe you will again. I'd hate to have to go hunt down a new toy." His smile broadened. "You hear that? You're *special*."

That smile vanished when Lucas remained silent, and the horse took a single, slow, menacing step forward. With his size, that one step was enough to put him almost directly over Lucas. "What do we say?" he snarled, the sweetness suddenly gone from his voice.

Lucas gulped, but made sure to keep his eyes off the horse's. He wasn't allowed. "Th... thank you..." he managed to eventually force out.

Damien growled to himself as he brought a hoof down on Lucas' tail. The fox screamed as pain rushed up his spine, and then he felt the second wave of agony run through him as the pain only spurred his broken leg into motion. "Thank you?" echoed the equine.

"Sir!" Lucas all but howled, before he sank back down into desperate sobs. "Thank you, sir! Thank you, sir! *Thank you, sir!*"

He broke off as the sobbing overrode his ability to speak. It only deepened as Damien leaned down over him, and it broke only long enough for a whimper as the horse planted a delicate kiss on Lucas' forehead. "You see?" he said, his voice smooth and quiet and calm again. "You remember, don't you? You know what to do. What to say. You know how to behave and what is expected of you." One hand came down to grab Lucas by the head, and the fox gasped as he was forced to face the horse fully. "Are you going to behave?"

"Yes, sir." Lucas tucked his tail in the moment Damien lifted his hoof up off it and cradled it in both arms.

"You are going to be honest with me." This time, it wasn't a question. It was an order.

"Yes, sir."

Damien snorted once as he sank down to one knee in front of the fox. He let go of Lucas' head, and allowed the fox to quickly curl tighter in on himself. "Who do you belong to?"

"You, sir," he replied, his voice a quiet drone. He knew the answer, even as he begged the situation to just be a horrible nightmare. He didn't want it to be true.

But wanting it to not be true didn't make it so. The horse nodded once as he withdrew the other hand from behind his back. In his grip was what looked by contrast to be a very small syringe, filled with clear liquid. "Who do you know in Bridgeport?" he asked. "Who, outside of your whoring job, knows you?"

Lucas hesitated a moment as he eyed off the syringe. He was sure that, no matter what was in that thing, he wanted no part in it. But if he told Damien about Taylor, Damien might go after him next. A cop boyfriend was one thing, but Damien had found *him*. If he said anything about Taylor, Taylor would be Damien's next order of business. "Sir made sure I only needed him," he said at last. It was truth, after a fashion.

He'd waited too long. The backhand that came across Lucas' cheek didn't sting as much as the stomp to his tail, but his muzzle was still tender from the beating he'd last received. "The truth, slut," he growled.

"Sir made sure I only needed him," Lucas repeated, more insistently. The blow came again, and this time fresh blood splattered across the ground from Lucas' muzzle. "Karl Halleren made me leave where I was. I was alone! I had no one! No friends! No family! Truthfully, sir! Truthfully!" He squeezed his eyes shut, braced for another strike.

It didn't come. Instead, the fox slowly started to open his eyes. He could barely catch the smile on Damien's face, but it was enough to make him feel relieved. Lucas had never been a particularly good liar when they'd first met, but learning to tell clients what they wanted to hear... it had been a carefully cultivated skill. Maybe it could even save his life.

"This," Damien said as he waved the syringe, "is a little something to help you talk to me. We don't normally talk, do we? Your muzzle has so many better uses." He chuckled to himself as Lucas began to push back harder from him, as if the fox had somewhere to go. "It's going to help you remember some work you used to do for me. For some friends of mine. I need to know just how much of it you remember, because those friends of mine are... very, very upset you left me. Even more upset than me."

Lucas still pushed back from Damien as best he could, but another backhand from the horse slammed Lucas out of the corner entirely and across the wall to slide to the floor. Dazed, he was barely able to raise an arm to defend himself as Damien pressed him into the ground. "Still, slut. Stay still."

The command was clearly stated, and Lucas knew he had no choice. Whatever was in that syringe could hurt him, but Damien could *kill* him. His muscles tensed one last time before he finally relaxed himself as best he could. The sooner it was over with, the better. The last thing he needed was the needle to break off in a vein.

He'd expected the jab in an arm, or maybe his leg. If he hadn't been so dazed by the blow he'd suffered and the beatings he'd accumulated, Lucas might have fought back against the prick in his neck, but as it was he could only tense for a moment before a squeeze from Damien's free hand reminded him that he'd been given an order. Lucas lay still as he felt the contents of the syringe pump into his bloodstream. "There..." Damien crooned. "That wasn't so hard, was it? Good boy."

"Thank you, sir," Lucas mumbled beneath the horse. He hoped the words would be loud enough, and he gasped as he felt the syringe pulled from his neck. As the equine sat up, Lucas pressed a couple of fingers to his neck to keep pressure where the needle had been. Of course he didn't care about sanitizing the needle or the fox's skin. Lucas could only hope the needle hadn't been used. A glance at it showed that everything seemed to be clean, but that didn't mean anything.

"See? You remember how to behave. I'm so glad." His smile was cold as he traced a finger slowly across the fox's chin. "You were always the best fuck I could get, boy. I'm so glad I've got you back again."

Lucas shivered but he knew Damien would punish his silence. "Yes, sir," he replied as he closed his eyes.

No blow came, but when Lucas opened his eyes he caught the edge of Damien's glare. He'd wanted the fox to express gratitude. Lucas cringed back, but he still held his tongue. It was all the power he had left.

A wave of dizziness slowly brewed and then washed down over the fox as whatever he'd been injected with started to affect him. He winced and shook his head slowly, and the motion accidentally broke Damien's hold on his chin. Lucas yelped in pain as he was backhanded again, though that pain was somewhat muted by whatever was flooding his system.

Damien brought his hand back for another blow, but he held back. Instead, after a moment, he lowered the hand again with a smile. Lucas' head lolled low until he leaned in and firmly tipped it back up again, and the fox's eyes swam as he tried to focus on the equine face before him. "Oh, *good*. You're feeling it now. Then we can finally have our little chat, sort everything out... and set things back to the way they should be. Just need you to answer some questions, and then we can go back home. Together."

Lucas squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, before he grunted softly and gave a little nod. Every moment that went by made it harder for the fox to focus. He tried to force his eyes to Damien, but the effort only sent new dizziness through him. Ordinarily, it might have been alarming. In that moment however, all he could do was smile. It didn't feel too bad. Kinda floaty. Better, certainly, than anything else Damien had done to him.

"Listen up, fox," came Damien's voice, and it rang through the fog that began to fill Lucas' mind with an authority and surety that pierced the effects of the drug. "You can hear me, can't you? Answer."

"Yes, sir," he mumbled. The pain he felt ebbed away; even his broken leg was reduced to a dull throbbing that did little to bug him.

"Good." The assurance sent a shiver through Lucas. It felt good; it made him glad to answer properly, but on some level it felt off. Wrong. "Remember when you stayed with me. Remember it. Can you remember it, fox?"

At the instruction, Lucas couldn't help but cast his mind back. Even through the warm haze that suffused him, he felt a shiver run through his body. Memories of a time that was filled with pain and humiliation were called up, and a whimper slipped out of Lucas as he wordlessly nodded. He couldn't even bring himself to answer.

Even if he didn't answer the way Damien wanted, it was clear that he was impressed with Lucas' reaction. "Oh, I'll take that as a yes. Good." He leaned in a little closer to Lucas' face, and the fox's eyes finally focused on him even as the room around the equine melted away. "I showed you documents, fox. Financial records. Do you remember?"

The shivering slowed, but it didn't quite stop. Lucas' memories were locked on Damien's abuse more than what he was asking specifically for. Flashed popped into his head, all of the furious horse's fists beating him, or hoofs kicking him, or of careful knife cuts and threats. Sometimes he saw sheets of paper, or computer screens, but those images always blurred into Damien's 'coercions' or 'punishments' and Lucas couldn't hold onto them for long.

He looked up to Damien to tell him no, but the horse wasn't looking at him. Instead he looked at the doorway, and Lucas' head rolled lazily about until he brought it into his skewed view. There was a coyote there and Lucas could make out the motions of his muzzle, but not the words that came out. They didn't matter to him. They weren't Damien's words. Only Damien's words mattered.

Whatever the words were though, they seemed to upset the equine. "Then go stop him, you useless fuck," rang Damien's words in Lucas' ears. "Kill him or something; I don't fucking care. I've got to finish this up... and give me those. Hey! Fox! Eyes on me."

The instruction caused Lucas to immediately obey, as he swung his head about to bring Damien back into sole focus. The horse looked frustrated all of a sudden as he waved a handful of paper sheets in front of him. In his state, Lucas could barely make out that they

had letters and numbers printed on them, but not what they were. “The financial records I showed you. *These* companies. Do you remember them?”

Again Lucas’ mind was cast back, but just as before he couldn’t pierce the horse’s own cruelty. An answer seemed just out of reach. Answers didn’t seem to matter as Lucas felt again and again the pain that Damien had subjected him to. It overrode anything else that he could have recalled. The broken jaw. The fractured arm. The bruises and the beatings and the abuse.

When he failed to answer, it wasn’t a backhand that crashed into his cheek. Instead, the horse’s fist rose to the occasion, and Lucas grunted as the real pain broke through the foggy remembrance. He hit the ground as another spike of pain broke through the haze with his head’s bounce against solid concrete. It broke the tide of memories, and Lucas almost gasped in relief. “What are you remembering, slut?” Damien demanded. His voice sounded more insistent, more urgent than it had before. “Tell me!”

“Pain,” Lucas hissed as he drew himself into as tight a little ball as he could manage. “You made... so much pain...”

“I don’t care about your pain, fox. *Remember!*” Damien reached down and grabbed Lucas by the middle, and as he rose he pulled the fox up and pinned him against the wall. Lucas lay limp in his grip as Damien suspended him in the air. “What do you remember about the records? The companies?” One of his hands shifted to Lucas’ throat, and his vision sparked for a moment as his airflow was suddenly stymied. “Tell me! Tell me or I’ll choke it out of you!”

Another shout that Lucas couldn’t parse came from the doorway. The figure that stood in it was shadowed, but they held something out ahead of them that seemed to have captured Damien’s attention. Whatever it was, it only made the horse squeeze tighter at Lucas’ neck. “The hell are *you* doing here?”

Another unintelligible shout came from the figure in the doorway, and Damien began to laugh. “Oh, don’t even think about it,” he growled, and Lucas felt Damien’s fingers tightened again. “I’ll break him before you can even try.”

One of Lucas’ arms weakly came up, but in his drugged state he couldn’t even so much as brush the horse’s wrist. He felt himself begin to shake as darkness tugged in at the edge of his vision, only for his lungs to suck in fresh air as Damien relaxed his grip for just a couple of seconds. With that momentary surge of oxygen to his brain, he was able to force his eyes to focus and immediately wished he hadn’t.

Damien’s attention was on the figure in the doorway. The thing in the figure’s hands became clearer for a moment as a revolver, pointed right at Damien’s chest. He still couldn’t see the figure themselves, but they were tall. Not as tall as Damien, but *big*. Something was happening, but Lucas couldn’t act.

Instead, he could only dangle there, held up by his throat as Damien laughed at the person with the revolver. “You shoot me, you might hit the slut. You want to kill him as bad as you wanna kill me, do you?”

The shadow’s arm lowered slightly for a moment, before they said something and lifted the gun higher. Lucas’ eyes went wide as Damien squeezed his throat tighter, and then pulled him off the wall to swing him about toward his assailant.

With the drugs already in his body, Lucas felt everything in slow motion. His vision began to darken again as Damien choked the air out of him. He heard the impossibly loud report of the revolver; the sound of struck concrete. Pain in his neck came as he was wrenched around. It lessened with the next bark of the revolver, somewhat quieter as his ears rang from the first shot. The grip on his neck relaxed. Vanished.

But his body stayed in motion. Impact came as Lucas hit the wall head-first, and he saw a flash of red before he tumbled backward and to the ground. He barely felt the floor

when he struck it. Instead, he felt warmth run down his face from somewhere further up his head, and he groaned as he sprawled out. Once more his vision began to tunnel.

This time it didn't stop. The darkness rushed up to close around Lucas as the shadowy figure leaned over him. He almost caught sight of a muzzle or face or *something*, before the warmth that gushed from his head flowed down across one eye.

Then both eyes closed, and Lucas was gone.

Everything hurt.

That was a good sign, of course; it meant that Lucas was alive. He groaned as he squeezed his eyes shut a little tighter against the pain and tried to rise. There was a gentle but firm pressure on his chest that helped keep him in place. "Easy there... easy. Relax. You're safe." Female voice, but unfamiliar.

It took more effort than Lucas was comfortable with to open his eyes. They both felt like the flesh around them was puffy and swollen, and that made sense. His recollection of the events that had led up to him waking up again were a blur, and he tried to open his muzzle and ask. His whole mouth tasted dry, and no sound came out save for a quiet, pathetic gasp.

"No," came that quiet, insistent voice again from beside him. "No, wait. Give it a moment. You've been laying in that bed for a few weeks now. You have to take it easy."

If they had been capable, Lucas' eyes might have gone wide. In his state, all they did was introduce a new pain in his head from the brightness around him. He almost shot up, but his whole body ached in entirely unpleasant ways. Parts of him that he didn't even know existed began to radiate new, dull pain that caused him to gasp all over again.

A gentle hand reached up to stroke across the top of his head. Fingers ran through his fur as a quiet shushing sound reached his ears. Lucas turned to the side and tried to ease his eyes open again, and gradually his vision came back to him. The owner of the paw atop his head came into view, and he felt one ear perk ever so slightly. "T... T..." Lucas' brow furrowed. Damnable dry muzzle. "T...ay? Tay?"

As his vision settled, he could see the otter start to smile. "I'm here," he quietly replied. "How're... uh... how're you feeling?"

"That can wait a moment," came the unfamiliar voice again, and Lucas rolled his head toward it. A ferret in a nurse's outfit looked him over and gave a soft smile of her own. "Sir? Can you tell me your name, please?"

He took a second to try and force moisture across his tongue and through his mouth before he attempted speech again. "Lucas," he rasped at last. "I'm Lucas... Lucas Vega."

"Very good, sir." The ferret smiled as she placed a gentle paw on the fox's shoulder. "Just take it easy, okay? Relax. You're safe. I'll go get the doctor."

Lucas tried to nod, but a wave of dizziness washed over him and sent him sinking back down onto the hospital bed again. He blinked a couple of times as the nurse headed out, and slowly rolled his head to bring Taylor back into view. "Whatcha doing here?" he asked.

The otter frowned, even though his muzzle quirked into a smile. "Not asking what happened, not asking what happened to you... you want to know why *I'm* here?"

"Just surprised's all." Lucas sighed as he leaned his head back. He tried to lift an arm to rub at his face, but a twinge from it stalled the motion out. He opened his eyes again to look himself over, and for the first time took in the needle buried in the arm. He took it in for a moment before he lay the arm gingerly back down. "So... what happened?"

This time, Taylor chuckled quietly to himself. "What happened is I got on the phone with your boss's boss and chewed him out when you didn't come home," he replied. "He flew right out himself to get you. Don't think *my* supervisor would do that. He's why you're here now."

Lucas nodded slowly as he once more tried to ease himself a little higher in the bed. He remembered the figure with the revolver, and the shouting, and then the gunshots... it had to have been Carter! "Is he-"

"You're lying in a hospital bed and you're asking me if *he's* okay?" The otter rolled his eyes, but the smile was still there. He looked genuinely relieved to see Lucas conscious. "He's fine. Angry, but fine." Taylor's expression soured for a moment. "Apparently your boss here sold you out. Once this Carter guy figured it out, he went digging into the records.

Turns out your boss was embezzling big time, took your apartment for himself... not to mention the way he sold you out to Damien. Carter found out where Damien was holed up with you and told me to call the police while he went to get you.”

The mere mention of the horse’s name jerked Lucas upright, and another wave of dizziness forced him back down again with a groan. Taylor was there with a gentle paw to help ease him back into position on the bed again. “Whoa, there. Take it easy, you idiot. You’ve been in that bed for almost a month now. You’re gonna break something *else* if you keep this up.”

“Where’s... what’s...” Lucas shook his head slowly and ignored the dizziness to force the words out. “What... happened... to Damien?”

Taylor glanced back toward the door. “He’s..., ah, he’s dead, Lucas. Far as everyone’s concerned, Carter shot him.” He looked back at Lucas again, but he couldn’t meet the fox’s gaze. “We thought you might be, too. Everything that he did to you... this list of your functional body parts was shorter than the list of damaged ones. If I hadn’t been disgusted, I’d have been impressed.”

Lucas frowned at the otter. “What happened to me?”

He shrugged. “Let’s see. Four broken ribs, skull cracked in two places, both legs broken, cracked pelvis, significant... ah... *rectal tearing*, too many lacerations and contusions to count, the chance of asphyxia-induced brain damage, and apparently whatever drugs they pumped into you wreaked havoc with your nervous system for a while.” The otter winced, and his tone grew more subdued as he listed everything off. “That’s just the stuff I remember being told about. I was... really scared you weren’t going to pull through. It sounded like... like he was trying to kill you when Carter busted in.”

“Think he tried,” Lucas said with a slow nod. “He was choking me out... might have broken my neck if Carter took longer.”

“Glad he didn’t.” Taylor reached out to gently pat one of the fox’s paws with his own. “Anyway, he brought you here, along with a whole mess of paperwork he took from wherever he found you.” The otter hooked a thumb toward the door. “He’d be here, but he’s spent most of his time with the cops. I called them once I knew Carter was coming, but they couldn’t find you. Wasn’t until Carter put some serious hurt on your boss that he gave up where Damien was.” Taylor smiled for a second, before it faded away again. “Damien’s lucky, really.”

Lucas blinked as his ears twitched back. “He’s dead. You said so.”

The otter nodded once. “Mmm, but that paperwork Carter brought out apparently busted some big mafia ring or something. Heard one of the cops talking about Damien being some sorta enforcer for a mob family. You didn’t know?” He winced for a moment as Lucas slowly shook his head. “I think that’s why they’re looking to talk to you, too. Remember how you said Damien made you go over some financial documents for him, and they seemed dirty?”

“Vaguely,” Lucas admitted. He lifted the arm that didn’t have a needle in it to rub gently at the side of his head. The bruise there was pounding. All the talk was giving him a fresh headache. “I don’t remember when I told you right now, but... yeah. I remember. I... think he was asking about it when Carter found me.”

Taylor nodded again. “Well, those financials you went over *were* dirty, turns out. The cops think Damien was using you to find the flaws in their cooked books so they could fix it. Probably why he went to all the trouble to find you.” The otter tried a little smile. “We were just lucky that your boss was such a piece of shit. If Carter weren’t so scary, he never would have found you. Worked out well.” Taylor’s expression turned thoughtful. “Well, even though the cops are pretty pissed he went off by himself to be a hero.”

The fox’s eyes widened. “He’s in trouble for saving me?” he asked.

Taylor smirked and shook his head as Lucas sighed with relief. "Nah. I mean... well, yeah. Lucas, he shot someone dead... there's usually fallout from that. But he's apparently got a pretty good lawyer, and I think he's arguing that he's allowed to concealed carry and that he fired only to save your life." He laughed softly for a moment. "I think this Halleran guy was gonna press assault charges, but given how everything worked out I think he's gonna have to worry about saving himself, not dooming Carter."

The door to the room opened again, and both Lucas and Taylor looked up as a smiling female tiger stepped into the room. She wore the clean white coat of a doctor, and she adjusted a pair of sensible glasses atop her muzzle as she stepped over to the side of the fox's bed. "Good afternoon, Mister Vega," she said. "I'm Doctor Bailey, and it's good to see you awake again."

"Good to be here, I think," he replied with the best smile he could muster. "Thanks for looking after me."

"Well you didn't make it easy, but we do our best here." She threw the fox a cheeky little wink before she turned to Taylor. "And I'm very sorry sir, but I'm going to have to ask you to leave now. I need to run some tests, and then Mister Vega is probably going to need some more rest. You can tell the police officers out there that I'll let them know when he's in any shape for their questions."

"If you think I'm going anywhere-" Taylor began.

But Lucas interrupted with a smile, "It's okay, Tay. I need you to do me a favor anyway."

The otter blinked as he turned back to Lucas. "What is it?"

"Go find Carter," he said with a nod. "Tell him I'm okay, and need to talk to him. I gotta thank him for coming to get me."

Both of Taylor's eyebrows lifted. "And what about me? I had to-"

"Thank you, Taylor," Lucas interrupted again, the smile still on his muzzle. "Thank you for worrying about me, and for calling Carter. For... everything. Thank you."

The otter's smile came back, thin as it was, and he nodded back to the fox. "Well, someone's gotta look out for you," he muttered, before he reached down to give Lucas' paw another gentle squeeze. "Take care, Lucas. I'll see you as soon as they let me back in."

Lucas nodded as he watched the otter reluctantly turn and go. He smiled until the door closed behind him, and then sighed and leaned back into the bed. "Thanks, Tay."

He took a deep breath and held it for a moment. It was all over, at least for now. There'd no doubt be court hearings for Carter and recovery for god knew how long, but Damien was... gone. Dead. The horse couldn't hurt him anymore. That pain that he was suffering thanks to Damien was the last pain Damien would ever cause. Not just to him, but to others. It was over.

When he opened his eyes again and sighed, it was with Doctor Bailey staring down at him with a smile of her own. "Was that your boyfriend?" she asked.

"Ex-boyfriend, unfortunately," he replied with a shake of his head. "He's... better to me than I deserve."

"Can't say better, but definitely good to you. He's barely left your side since you were brought in." She waved toward the bed as her other paw dipped into a pocket. "Do you think you can sit up, or are you better down there?"

Lucas just chuckled quietly and shook his head slowly from side to side. He'd learned his lesson. "Better here, thanks. Already tried getting up and... well, I'd prefer not to try it again, if that's fine."

"Not a problem, Mister Vega." Her other paw lifted up from her pocket, a small flashlight held tight in her grip. She brought it up above Lucas and clicked it on, and the fox recoiled from the bright light. "Direct your vision here, please. And don't worry."

“Things are only going to get better for you. I promise.”

Four years later...

“Thank you for your patronage, sir!” said the fox behind the counter as he offered the client’s back a cheerful smile. “We look forward to your next visit.”

The wolf just grunted and tugged his coat tighter around his middle. The fox — barely out of his teens and with a youthfulness to his face that helped sell the delights of James Carter’s establishment — waited at least until their patron had left and was out of sight before he rolled his eyes. Typical wolf, he bet. The poor boy who’d had to service him probably hadn’t even gotten off.

Still, working behind the counter was nice, if not as lucrative as the ‘personal service representatives’ that hiked their tails for a living. For that fox, the trade was a perfectly acceptable one. He smiled warmly as the naked and somewhat sticky rabbit that came from the hall where the suites were located tossed him a thumbs-down and a smirk before he vanished to the showers. Owen still had two more clients to go. Poor thing.

Thankfully, the fox’s shift was almost up. His smile turned tired and grateful a few moments later as from the front door came the tall, lithe husky that was there to relieve him. “Evening, Andy!” he called out.

“Heya, Tim. How’s business tonight?” the husky asked. He trotted over to the desk and draped his coat over the back of the fox’s chair as the vulpine vacated it.

“Booming. Full booking, so you’re gonna have your work cut out for you!” The fox’s grin widened. There was a large group coming in just an hour or so, and that wasn’t his problem. Andy would have to juggle the tight schedules and make sure the boys were all ready for their clients. “Need any help getting ready?”

The husky just shook his head and sank down into the chair as he called up the client registry on the computer. “Nah, it should be all good. You gonna go see the boss before you go?”

Tim nodded as he glanced down the hallway. He’d heard about Carter’s approach to running his establishments, but actually experiencing a work environment with such a caring group of co-workers — and a warm, friendly, approachable boss to boot — was something he’d never dared hope for. “Yeah, I need to see him about some time off in a few weeks. Sister’s gettin’ married, so...”

“Hey, congrats. Give her all the best from us.” The husky smiled as he nodded toward the hall. “Might wanna go now. There’s some late-night roadworks going on, so getting home might take a while.

The fox nodded, his smile growing wider as he started down the hall. “Thanks, Andy. See you on the way out!”

In fairness, when he’d told his family and friends he worked reception, Tim always left out the part where it was the front desk at a gay whorehouse. It wasn’t that he was ashamed to be working there. Quite the opposite, in fact; he loved his job. Despite the fact that in the last few years the CEO had spread the business to a half dozen locations all over the country, it just wasn’t the sort of thing that he was comfortable discussing with them.

When he reached the door to his boss’s office, Tim hesitated a moment. He could hear two voices inside and, while he couldn’t make out the conversation, it almost sounded like they were arguing over something. He frowned for a moment before he shrugged and rapped on the door. “Excuse me, sir?”

“Come in!” came a curt, loud call.

It wasn’t until Tim opened the door that he realized he’d misheard. He hadn’t been told to enter. The voice had not shouted *come in* so much as *cummin’*. The sight that greeted him — naked from the waist-down fox bent over the desk while a large, equally half-naked

equine rammed himself into the vulpine's backside — wasn't one that Tim had seen before, but he'd worked there long enough to not be fussed by the sight.

He had the decency to wait, standing still while the horse hilted himself in the fox's rump and squeezed at his hip with one hand. Wet *splat* noises could be heard as the fox began to twitch and writhe under the grip of the larger male, and Tim supposed that the horse's unseen other hand was responsible for the explosive climax the fox had just undergone. Well, he supposed that the hand *and* the erupting horse cock in his ass might have contributed equally.

When the pair came down from their respective highs, both the horse and the fox seemed to notice him for the first time. Tim smiled as he fought the urge to avert his eyes. "It's good to see you, Mister Carter," he said as the horse began to grin. "Slumming it in Bridgeport for a night, are you?"

"Just here for a performance evaluation," he replied with a chuckle as he swatted the rump of the fox under him. Said fox yipped and glared back at him, but the glare lost some of its intensity with the cool little smile curling at the edge of his muzzle. "I take it everything's working nicely down here? You're happy with the work? Workmates? Boss?"

It almost surprised Tim with how easy it was to look the CEO in the eye — especially when he was balls-deep in his subordinate — and speak candidly about his work. "Honestly, sir, this is the best job I've ever had," he replied with an easy smile of his own. "I couldn't be happier. I think the Bridgeport operation is in the most capable paws."

"Yeah, well... here, hold on a sec. Clench up, sweetie." The horse paused for a moment before he began to pull himself slowly out of the fox under him, and he seemed to sigh in either relief or regret as his softening shaft fell free of that well-used hole. The fox stood up a little taller and leaned to the side to stretch his back as the horse chuckled to himself. "Not like we could do worse than Halleran."

Tim frowned at the name. Everyone who worked there either knew or knew of the previous boss of the establishment. He'd been arrested on and convicted for charges of accessory to kidnapping, embezzlement and a whole host of other criminal charges. Carter was right; the bar hadn't been set high. "I think you found the best person to replace him, sir," he said as he glanced at the other fox.

Carter just laughed and patted the vulpine's shoulder. "Hear that, Lucas? I think you've got a fan."

"I'm just doing the best I can," he replied with a wave of his paw as he glanced back at Tim. "I'll be with you in just a sec, Tim. You don't mind?"

"Not at all, sir," he replied as he settled back against the wall.

The horse chuckled again as Lucas smiled up at him. "You're headed back west already?" the fox asked. "You just got in yesterday morning, and Taylor and Mike have their barbeque tomorrow afternoon. My brother's back from Zimbabwe and *he's* making it... you can't go back now."

"It's all work, work, work, unfortunately" Carter replied as he leaned down to plant a gentle kiss on the fox's forehead. "I've gotta make sure the new guy's handling the old place right and then I'll be back again. You'll have to apologize to Taylor for me flaking out again, but I *will* catch your brother before he has to head back. I promise we'll take a couple of days just for ourselves once everything's settled. You can handle me going away for a week if you get that after it, right?"

"Only if I get to be on top this time, Jim," replied Lucas as he leaned up to catch the horse's muzzle with his own. He held the kiss for a moment before he pulled back with a smile. "Fine. It's okay. You take care, hon. And hey, you'll tell John hello for me if you see him?"

The smirk on Carter's muzzle lingered as he headed, still naked from the waist-down, toward the door. "'Course I will. He misses you, you know. And he's not the only one." His gaze turned to Tim with a wink. "He's all yours, kid. Have a good night."

"You too, sir," Tim replied as Carter swept out of the room. He frowned for a second before he turned back to Lucas and hooked a thumb toward the door. "He's leaving his pants?" he asked.

Lucas laughed and shook his head as he settled carefully into the chair behind his desk. "He came here without them; left them in my room," the fox explained. He leaned back in his chair and waved the younger fox over. "So what can I do for you, Tim? Is something wrong?"

Tim shook his head as he started toward the desk, though he still glanced back at the door with one ear perked. "How long have you and the CEO been... you know..."

"We've been together for a little over a year now," Lucas replied. He cocked an eyebrow as he perked up both ears. "Took a while for me to look at a horse okay, honestly. We'd prefer to keep it quiet, though; we don't want anyone thinking I slept my way to this position." He threw the younger fox a coy wink. "But you didn't come all the way here just to ask about my sex life, I hope."

At Lucas' smile, Tim started to laugh and shook his head. "No, sir. I was just looking to organize a little time off, if that's fine with you. My sister's getting married, and-"

"Say no more," Lucas interrupted with a wave of his hand as he leaned forward and shuffled the computer mouse across its pad. "Uh... well, say a *little* more. When's the big day?"

Tim could barely contain his smile as he watched Lucas work. "Well, it's not for a few months yet. She's aiming for the seventeenth of May."

As he spoke, Lucas nodded along. "That's not a problem, Tim. We can cover that for you, no worries." He glanced up from the computer screen. "A week's fine, right? Take your time, see your family, spend time with your sister before the big day..."

Both of Tim's ears drooped before he could stop them, and the smile he presented his boss a few moments later was doubtless completely transparent. "Oh, I was just looking for the day itself," he replied. "I've been sending a lot of my pay home... helping with dad's hospital bill. Remember, that time I took off to take care of him about three months back? That was all my paid vacation time I'd saved."

Lucas just blinked at him, and one ear slowly perked up. "And you only want the one day off because you can't afford to take the whole week?" His other ear lifted as Tim nodded, and the older fox began to smile. "Sweety, you're taking the week. End of story."

Tim felt a moment's concern rush through him, and he took a quick step forward. "But sir, I can't-"

"You can, and you will," Lucas replied with a firm nod. "A week's paid time off. That's not negotiable, Tim."

"Sir, I just can't afford to... wait, what?" Tim blinked with confusion. Paid time off?

Lucas just continued to smile. "Hon, I don't have much of my blood family anymore. Family's important. I've tried to make sure that everyone that works here knows that this is more than just a business. This is a little family of our own making, too. Family takes care of itself, just like you and your dad, or you and your sister." He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "This place was here for me when I had nothing else. It's here for you, too. Go see your family. I'll take care of everything here."

Tim was stunned. He knew that his boss was a nice guy, but this was more than he'd ever expected. "I... I don't know what to say, sir."

"You can start using my name, for one." Lucas smiled wider. "I might be your boss, but once upon a time I was just another cute boy servicing the clients. And second, you don't

have to say anything. Business is good, life is good, I don't have an ex with an ax to grind following me around and we don't have a boss screwing with the books and skimming from our profits anymore. I can definitely afford to give you a week's pay for some extra time off. If we need someone on front desk, I can fill in for you myself. It's no trouble."

"I..." The younger fox was still flabbergasted, but he nodded slowly as he backed toward the door. "Thank you, s... uh, Lucas. Thanks. Is there anything I can... you know... do for you?"

Lucas shook his head as he waved toward the door. "You go take care of your dad and see your sister get married, and then you just come back to work ready to get back into it. Do that for me, and we'll call it even. Alright?"

"Alright. I... I think I can do that for you." Tim began to beam as he nodded to his boss. "You know, I didn't know the guy who ran this place before you, but... you're good people. Thank you."

Tim turned away as Lucas began to chuckle to himself. He slipped out of the door and took a deep breath, and let it all out with a massive smile. Perfect. Not only would he make the wedding, but he could even see his dad and spend some time back home while he was at it. It was more than he could have hoped for.

He hadn't been worried. Since he'd started, Tim had heard horror stories of the old boss. The working boys only had praise to offer Lucas, though. They always said that he'd been there in their place, and that he'd seen the worst clients that any of them had ever experienced. Some had even mentioned that he'd come to take certain clients off their hands when they didn't know how to handle them. He cared for every one of his employees, and he made sure that they were all healthy and happy. In fact, as he thought about it, Tim couldn't remember a single negative comment anyone had ever made with any seriousness about Lucas. The fox had earned the respect of his staff.

And he'd reaffirmed Tim's. As the fox all but bounded down the hallway and headed for the front door, he'd thrown Andy a jaunty wave and shared the good news. He had, of course, hurried out of the lobby before anyone else could come in. There was that big group still looming ahead, and Tim didn't want to get in Andy's way. Those clients, like the whole Bridgeport operation and everyone in it, was in good paws. Tim smiled; Lucas had been right.

Business, and life, *were* good indeed.