

Heaven Help My Heart

It almost looked to Alisha as though the warehouse was empty when he and Lyle arrived. The fox frowned as he stepped out of Lyle's van and cast his gaze around. "You're sure everyone's here?" he asked.

"No reason why they wouldn't be," Lyle replied as he strode over to the warehouse's door. He twirled a small keycard between his fingers before he slid it across the handle, and Alisha caught the barest flicker of light from the keyhole in the handle's lock. The wolf pulled the door open and waved him inside as he added, "I was monitoring all the comms, remember? The others should already be here."

Alisha didn't have an answer for that, so he bit his tongue. That Gabriel was upset with him was dangerous, but odds were good he was now going to have to lie to the lion's face again. The fox felt his tail begin to curl up between his legs in unconscious concern. He was walking on thin ice. Why the hell had he let this get so far out of control?

The sound of angry voices further inside did little to help ease the fox's concern. As he rounded a corner and entered the warehouse floor proper, he could see the source of the anger. Two figures stood in the center of the floor, one still and one pacing madly. The latter seemed to be a red panda girl, dressed as tastefully and expensively as Alisha himself. This then was Gabriel's newest student; Lyle had called her Emma Ainslow.

The former was a burly rat — a mouse, Alisha quickly corrected himself as he approached — that towered over her in what looked like the attire of a classy waiter. This had to be Baran Voronkov, and from what Lyle had told Alisha he was the brawn to Gabriel's brains. How a mouse that tall and that built was able to blend in as wait staff eluded Alisha. Perhaps there was more to him than just a strong arm.

While the wraps about Alisha's footpaws left each step near silent, Lyle's boots were louder. As the red panda paused for breath, her little ears twitched and she spun toward the fox and wolf. "You!" she hissed as she marched over, stiletto heels clicking on the concrete floor as she approached. "What the hell was that?"

Anger was the immediate, automatic response to this girl's attitude, but Alisha squashed it down. "I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about," he replied, voice even and cool.

Emma didn't stop until she was standing right in front of Alisha, and even in her heels her head barely came up to Alisha's neck. "What. The *hell*. Was that?" she replied, and her paw lifted to poke Alisha in the chest with each pause. "Hmm? We did *our* job. What happened, *tesoro*? Cold paws? Couldn't follow through on the mister?"

Inwardly, Alisha smiled. This had to be impostor syndrome from Gabriel's newest protégé. That she'd used Gabriel's pet term for Alisha — and in his native tongue no less — implied everything. Alisha tilted his head up and stared down the smaller female as coldly as he could muster. "I'm sorry. You must be *new*. The inexperience of youth, I suppose. I planted the drive, but the circumstances weren't right for more than that. Any half-decent grifter would have seen it... no wonder you didn't."

Emma's eyes widened with shock before rage narrowed them again. "Any half-decent grifter would have closed the deal right then and there," she growled back.

"Oh, absolutely. Spreading my legs at the function would have *certainly* completed this con the way Gabriel wants it. I can't see why he brought me in and didn't trust the whole con to you." Alisha allowed himself to smile. There was no joy in it, but all the better to make the red panda think there was.

It definitely riled her up further. "If Gabriel *had* trusted the whole grift to me, I'm sure I could have done better than some old fag who—"

"That is enough."

Emma fell silent instantly as four heads turned back toward the entrance. Gabriel was there, leaned against the wall that blocked the front door from view. His face lacked any sense of amusement. Indeed, he looked deadly serious as he shook his head.

Alisha immediately turned to face him fully and bowed his head, as he had always been taught to when Gabriel was upset with something. Emma, however, must not have learned that lesson yet. Instead she shoved past the fox to stand right in Gabriel's face. "This *whore* is—"

Her yip came with the crack of Gabriel's paw across the side of her face. The slap echoed through the warehouse, and when it faded there was an unnatural silence left in its wake. Emma didn't even straighten up from the blow; her body bent like a reed in the wind and stayed there, almost as if she were stunned by what had happened.

The lion allowed that silence to hold for a few seconds more, before he reached down and gently tilted Emma's head up by the chin. "That is enough," he repeated, and his tone remained completely unchanged. Emotionless. Calm. Firm. "Am I understood?"

"Si, signore." She stepped back slowly, and only when she was a few steps away did she dare straighten up again. Her head bowed, and she kept her eyes on the floor.

"This lovely creature is no whore," the lion continued as he waved a paw toward Alisha. "He is my greatest creation, and you have far to go if you are ever to meet the standard that he has set for you. You will *not*," he added as his voice cooled a few degrees, "insult me by degrading him. Am I understood?"

"Si, signore," she said again. Her voice wavered as she spoke, and Alisha could see the tremble in her arms. Obviously she was not used to this treatment from Gabriel. He wondered if Emma had ever been refused a thing in her life.

Gabriel finally pushed off the wall and started toward Alisha, Lyle and the mouse. He kept his silence until he stood before Alisha, and the fox didn't dare lift his head until Gabriel did it for him. "Tesoro. What happened in there, pray tell?"

"The time wasn't right for what Emma thinks was necessary," Alisha replied as she kept her eyes off his. It was less that he'd detect a lie, and more than he would see how Alisha feared his reprisal. That was as it should be... and honestly, it was far from an act in that moment. "I planted the drive, gave the introduction, and that's all that would fly. If I pushed harder, I would have lost him. He was suspicious of the Mercer offer... and justifiably so. He wasn't exactly set for seduction."

The lion's muzzle curled into a soft smile as he ran a thumb and claw gently down Alisha's cheek. "He is a gay male living a marital lie. Surely you have cracked harder nuts, so to speak, than this one?"

Alisha nodded and closed his eyes for a moment. Again, the question went through his mind; *why*? "I have," he agreed. "But this one is different. This isn't just about me." Finally, he lifted his gaze to meet the lion's. "This is about you, Gabriel. This job is important to you, and for more than helping me right a wrong. If I had pushed harder, either to lure him into something with Mercer or to seduce him directly, I would have lost him. I wish you could have seen what I saw."

"He could," Lyle piped up, his voice unusually timid. He seemed discomforted by the way Gabriel had slapped Emma. If Alisha hadn't received similar treatment, he might have held sympathy too. "He, uh... was patched into the security system. Cameras, microphones... the works. He was watching you work Terrel."

"And I want your honesty, mio caro." Gabriel's other paw lifted and came to rest with a gentle squeeze to Alisha's shoulder. "I know you, dear boy. I know you could have broken his will and given us what we need. Why did you not?"

“Your plan was wrong.” The words came out before Alisha could stop himself, but the moment they were in the air he knew he had to own it. He had to take control of the situation.

Thankfully, Gabriel looked surprised and interested rather than offended. Out of the corner of his eye, Alisha saw Emma cringe back, a smile on her muzzle. “How so?” he asked.

This, finally, provided a chance for Alisha to tear into what he’d seen wrong from the very outset. It gave him a way out, if he could convince Gabriel that this was his legitimate concern. “You took charge of all of this, knowing everything up-front about how I work and what I do. How I make my money. How I control males. How I twist them to my will.” He smiled as he reached up and gently placed both paws on Gabriel’s chest to push the lion back a step. “But you were wrong, Gabriel.

“This all works because of the dress and the makeup and the hair and the seduction... but that’s all targeted. That’s what you always taught me; target the mark with what they want.” The fox rolled his shoulders and placed a paw on one hip. “Honey, I seduce guys who are looking for a *girl*. Vincent isn’t gonna be seduced by all *this*.” He stroked his other paw down his side, smoothing out the dress. “Vincent needs a male to seduce him. You set me up to fail. You set me up to fail, and then you and your new student come in here and grill me on it? Please.”

“Grilled a little rare for my taste,” Emma muttered.

Gabriel didn’t turn to face her, but the red panda shrank back again as the lion curled the paw she could see into a fist. He waited a moment to make sure that she got the message before he smiled at Alisha. “My dear boy, I didn’t intend for you to seduce him right then and there, and certainly not as Catherine Miller. Poor Emma has failed to see the big picture again... and it surprises me that you have as well.”

“You wanted me to establish myself and the proposal as legitimate first,” the fox replied as he drew himself up again. He cast a sideways glance at Emma, who looked only more subdued now. “Once that’s done... I’m not sure what you want from me. Seduction is my game, Gabriel. I go to Vincent as a guy, and he *will* recognize me.”

The lion smiled as he gently traced a clawtip up beneath Alisha’s chin. “And how could he fail to? You are right, my dear, as ever. You were never meant to seduce him there and then, but your role was for far more than just the establishment of a cover.” His eyes drifted over to Lyle, and the wolf stiffened in a heartbeat. “You were able to swap Mister Terrel’s cell, I presume?”

A shiver went through Alisha as he casually — at least he *hoped* it was casual — turned his eyes to the hacker. Lyle nodded back with a smile. “Yeah, our girl played her part beautifully,” he said as he reached into a pocket. From it he withdrew the raccoon’s smartphone and waggled it about. “Never gave me away, and held him so good even *I* could lift it off him. Didn’t take long to clone, neither.”

The fox’s eyes zeroed in on that phone. The phone that, presumably, had his warning text on it. If Vince hadn’t erased the message, there was no doubt that Alisha was in trouble. “I was a distraction,” he muttered. Now Lyle’s waiter outfit made more sense. He’d been at the function too, which explained why he’d been silent while Alisha had spoken to Vince.

“And a finer one I could never have asked for,” Gabriel replied. He lifted his arms again and wrapped them tight around the fox’s middle. “You are a *gift*, tesoro. You did everything I could have expected... for now, of course. Later, there may be other roles to play.”

“And what happens now, then?” Alisha asked. The query came faster than he wanted, and Gabriel perked an eyebrow as the fox silently swore. “I’ve done my job, have I? No offense, Gabriel. You just know how I am around teams.” He allowed his eyes to narrow as he turned his glare on Emma. “Particularly those who attack me.”

Beside the red panda, the mouse smirked. His smile faded and his face became as stone again as Gabriel's eyes drifted over him. "You must forgive Miss Ainslow and Mister Voronkov. They don't know you as I do, and dear little Emma is such a jealous thing." He smirked. "She rather fancies herself the new you."

"Well, it's important to have dreams to strive for," Alisha said. She caught Emma's head lift and her muzzle open to respond, her gaze shifted to Gabriel instead. Though he wasn't looking at her, she still bowed her head again and bit her tongue. Maybe she was a faster study than Alisha had thought. "My question stands, Gabriel. Do you need anything more from me?"

He smiled back at the fox and shook his head. "Not presently, tesoro. You'll find a car outside; it is yours for as long as I'm in town. Go back to your suite and take some much-earned rest. Mister Davidson will contact you there when I have need of you again." The lion squeezed Alisha's shoulders. "Magnificent work tonight, mio caro. This is a fine beginning to the end of Mister Terrel."

Alisha had to force himself to smile back as he leaned up to gently kiss the lion's cheeks. As he stepped back, a set of car keys was dropped into his paw. "Grazi, Gabriel," he said, before he turned and started toward the exit. The fox held his breath and tilted his head up as he walked, though he did toss Emma a wink before he vanished around the corner. Beneath her bowed head, he could see the red panda seethe.

He of course was forced to maintain the facade of satisfaction all the way to the car, and even once there Alisha only allowed himself a tired little sigh. He couldn't do much of anything else; there was a good chance that the car itself was bugged. Once upon a time, Alisha wouldn't have cared that Gabriel was listening in. Then again, once upon a time he would never have dreamed of defying Gabriel.

Better to play it safe. He would take the car to the hotel, and then take a random, rental car to meet Vince. It would make him late, no doubt, but there was no other choice. Alisha couldn't even trust that Gabriel hadn't bugged that too, just to be sure. In his position, Alisha might have done as much. There was no telling just how much of his life the lion had already infiltrated in the name of pulling off whatever this grand con was.

Alisha closed his eyes for a moment and allowed himself to relax back in the driver's seat as he began to pull away from the warehouse. That wasn't precisely true. There was exactly one part of his life that he knew for a fact that Gabriel hadn't insinuated himself fully into yet.

The fox just had to figure out exactly what the hell he was going to say to that part when he made it to the rendezvous.

Once upon a time, the playground that was roughly equidistant from both Alan's house and Vince's had been an agreeable meeting point. At their youngest, they'd run shrieking around the playground with sticks they'd duel with as though they were lightsabers. As they'd aged, it had been a place they'd go at night to escape their respective families. It had been the place where a terrified Alan had confessed that he had feelings for Vince, and where Vince had surprised him with a gentle kiss; their respective firsts. It had history... fine symmetry.

Perhaps more importantly, there weren't any security cameras that Lyle could tap into anywhere nearby.

Now, what felt like a lifetime later, Alisha walked alongside the playground and fought back the tides of those memories. He averted his eyes from the slide whose enclosed design had made it a fine place for them to sneakily make out. He looked away from the fort

where Vince had achieved a rare victory in one of their duels. He closed his eyes to hide from the rope bridge that had always tangled his tail, and that Vince had always freed him from.

It didn't help when he caught sight of Vince, still in his suit from the function. The raccoon was lurking at the edge of the playground, nearby one of the benches that tired parents would watch their cubs from. He looked almost ready to bolt as Alisha made his way slowly over, careful to try not to let Vince spot him. He'd only have one shot at this.

Unfortunately, stealth wasn't exactly the fox's strong suit. He'd almost made it to Vince when the raccoon spotted him and waved. Alisha quickly pressed a finger to his muzzle and prayed to any gods who might be watching that Vince saw the sign.

He seemed to get the idea, and the muzzle he'd opened to speak shut itself with nary a word whispered. Alisha cast a quick glance around — had Vince really come alone? — as he hurried over. He paused as he looked Vince over. It was as though he'd come straight from the fundraiser. That was sure to prick a few ears.

The fox lifted a paw to the side of his head and motioned as though he were holding a phone. Vince nodded and reached into a suit pocket to withdraw his phone, and Alisha motioned toward it. The moment the raccoon handed it over, Alisha threw it deep into the bushes. He winced as he heard the tinkle of broken glass in the distance. "Uh... sorry."

"That's a hell of a way to say hi, but I'll take it." Vincent frowned as he looked the fox up and down. "Jesus, Alan. You look scared half to death. Your tail's all tucked and... what the hell's going on? What's this about? Where've you been?"

Now that he was face to face with Vince again, Alisha didn't know what to say. The stakes of everything seemed to fade as he lost himself in the confused stare of the raccoon. He had to tamp down the feelings that surged to the fore. They could wait. He was here with a purpose.

But what was the best way to bring it up? "You're in danger," he settled on with a shake of his head. "I can't get into all the details right now, but that wasn't your phone. If I only cracked the screen, they might not know I'm here with you yet. If I busted the GPS, they'll know something's up, and—"

"Slow the hell down, Alan," Vince interrupted as he lifted both paws. He frowned all the deeper as he reached forward to gently squeeze at the fox's shoulders. "Stop a moment. Take a breath."

Alisha blinked and brushed the paws off his shoulders. "You don't *have* a moment to stop, Vince," he growled back. "Did you hear a word I just said?"

The raccoon shrugged. "Alan, I'm running for the senate and I'm shaking things up. I know I'm in danger. Comes with the territory. You don't get to just waltz back in after a year and pull this."

"I've *pulled this* because if I wasn't involved in the con being run on you, I'd be reading about the alternative in the obituaries," growled the fox. That seemed to have the intended effect; Vince sobered right up and focused at last on Alisha. "Look, you need to drop out of this race."

And like that, the frustration and confusion was back on Vince's face. "That's not going to happen. This means too much to too many people, and—"

"*Obituaries*," Alisha snarled. "Fucking hell, I... do you know what I'm going through right now? I'm putting myself in shit so deep I can't see daylight and you're behaving as though nothing's wrong!"

"Nothing's out of the ordinary in my world, Alan," Vince said with a shake of his head. "You're the one who says you know what I don't. You send that text, then you show up as that girl from the pharmaceutical company, and I've got *nothing* to work with." He reached out before Alisha could pull away and grabbed one of the fox's paws to squeeze tight. "Help me understand."

Alisha's eyes narrowed, but he didn't pull the paw back. "Then stop interrupting me trying to explain, and let me tell you how much trouble you're in." He perked his ears and lifted his eyebrows as he waited for a challenge but none came. Thank goodness. "One of the best con artists in the business was hired by some mysterious, shadowy benefactors for a lot of money to destroy you. This con artist, Gabriel Moscatello... he's dangerous. He's got plans, and he sees those plans carried out. He doesn't make mistakes and he doesn't fail."

As the fox spoke, he watched Vincent's face. The raccoon nodded along, his eyes intent and focused. That there was no fear in his gaze didn't sit well with the fox. "He's after you, and someone else. As far as I can tell, it's all about your run for the senate. Gabriel's employers think you're going to win, and they don't want that."

"So they work for my opposite number?" The raccoon began to frown again.

But Alisha shook his head. "Probably not directly," he said. "These benefactors are probably either a criminal cartel or a quasi-legal organization that has interests in your opponent. Maybe he's involved, and maybe not. Maybe your opponent just has policies on the mind that help them, or maybe your policies make their work harder. I don't know. It doesn't matter. No one throws around this kind of money to take down a senate candidate without a damn good reason."

Vince nodded. "And I guess I can't go to the police with this?"

"And tell them what?" Alisha snorted. "That one criminal told you a bunch of criminals that he works with are gunning for you and someone else with the intent to ruin your political career? Oh, and you've got no evidence of anything?"

"Not unless you come in with me." The raccoon squeezed Alisha's held paw tightly. "You could get out. Implicate everyone else."

With a roll of his eyes, Alisha pulled his paw free at last and sighed. "Give up this life of crime, go legit, hook up with my ex and live a good, legal life? Drop the white knight routine, Vince. I don't get a happy ending and a way out. This is all I'm good at, and if I turned on Gabriel I would be *dead*. If he couldn't do it, friends of his would just to get in his good graces. Gabriel's a danger you have no clue about. I actually know what you're up against, and I'm fucking *terrified* of him. You should be, too."

The raccoon glanced around the dark park again. Perhaps some of Alisha's words had sunk in and he was feeling properly paranoid. "Then why are you telling me any of this at all?" he asked.

That was the question, and Alisha knew he didn't have an answer. He rolled his eyes again as he took a moment to look around as well. It failed to give him time to come up with a good response. "I don't know," he admitted at last as he returned his gaze to Vince. "Alright? A bit over a year ago, I wouldn't have. I'd have let you burn and been glad to watch it happen. Maybe grab some marshmallows."

"You never left us enough for s'mores after you got to them whenever we went camping," Vince muttered with a smirk.

Alisha began to smile, but he smothered it before it could linger. Focus. He couldn't let Vince distract him. "You're missing the point. You're in real trouble here, Vince. If you want to keep the life you've made, you need to kill this run before the run kills you. It's just that simple."

"And then what happens to you?" Vince asked. He shook his head as he folded his arms. "I suddenly drop out of this race and what? You don't think there's gonna be any questions leveled at you if I do that?"

The fox gave a sort of hissing sigh as he threw his arms up. "Then I lie! Jesus, Vince. The *first* thing I did when I heard about this and got a free moment was to text you. Trying to help you could get me killed, so how about you give me a little courtesy here! I'm trying to save your god damn life!"

For a long moment, the only sound in the park was that of the wind through the trees and bushes. Even in the dim light, Alisha could clearly see Vince's face. Now that he was actually looking and not distracted by the raccoon's seeming indifference to what was happening, he spotted something else; something he'd not have noticed if he hadn't made a career of reading people. Vince looked hurt. "What? What is it?"

Vince shook his head. "I looked for you," he replied, and he even began to smile. The hurt look in his eye didn't go away, though. "Tried to find you again. Whenever I wasn't busy this last year, I looked. Thought I had you a few times... you've had a busy life."

Ah, that was it. Vince was upset that meeting him again was all business, and not a chance to rekindle what they had. Obviously the raccoon hadn't figured out yet how serious Alisha had been when they'd last parted ways. "Alright, let's get this over with so we can both move on and address the shit we're up to our necks in," he growled. "Yes. I'm a thief. A con artist. A criminal. Yes, I've made a nice little name and life for myself. Hit me with it; I know it's coming."

"How?" Vince asked, just as the fox had expected. The hurt was front and center on his face again as he stared into Alisha's eyes. "You had a bright future ahead of you, Alan. You had the whole world. You were smarter than me. Shit, you wanted to be a *doctor*."

"When I was seven," countered Alisha.

"And when you were *seventeen*," Vince countered. "You wanted to be a doctor, or a movie director, or an engineer, or any one of a dozen different things that you wanted to do and *could* have done. Why this?"

"Because I couldn't get past *you*." Those words set Vince back; the raccoon physically recoiled from them as though Alisha had slapped him. "That what you really need to hear right now? You broke me in half and I didn't want *anything* anymore." The anger bubbled up inside Alisha as he spoke. These were the words he'd not even had the chance to say a year ago.

But now, since Vince had dragged it out, there was no stopping it. "Everything that I wanted reminded me of you. It reminded me of what you did to me. How you betrayed me. You *gutted* me, Vince. If you'd been honest about what was coming the moment you knew about it, I'd have been hurt but I could have *dealt* with it. You stole that from me.

"So yeah. I tried. I went to college and started a course my heart just wasn't into, and I tried anyway, and I failed. I failed so hard." The fox's ears pinned back hard enough to almost hurt as he snarled at Vince. "Until one day, someone saw something in me. They saw more than a miserable, depressed, pathetic little fox who couldn't get over the boyfriend he'd lost. He saw potential, and he helped me leave Alan behind."

"And helped you build 'Alisha' to take his place." Vince shook his head. "That's not you. You're *not* Alisha. I know it because if it was, you would have kept your con running last time instead of pulling back."

The anger continued to seethe under the surface, but the fox kept himself in check sufficiently to keep himself from yelling at the raccoon in front of him. "Because *one* of us was helping people," he bit out through clenched teeth. "One of us wasn't. One of us deserved to keep their life, and one didn't."

The raccoon's brow furrowed. "And now you're telling me to quit. To give up that chance to help people."

"Please; that'll only last until political realities set in and you start compromising that upstanding morality of yours." Alisha shook his head as he shoved Vince back. "And that's if you don't die. I can't protect you if you're not willing to protect yourself, Vincent."

"Oh, now it's Vincent, is it? What happened to Vince?" The raccoon stepped forward, though he kept his paws to himself that time. "You don't have to carry this all on your own, Alan, and I don't have to drop out. We can go to the police together. Get you out of this life."

Alisha's eyes narrowed, his ears flat. "Let me tell you how that would go," he said. "You call the police. The hacker he's employed, who has tapped every phone you own *and* probably has access to any computer you've got hooked up to the internet, detects it and informs Gabriel. You mention that I've betrayed him. So he sends the *assassin* he has in the crew to come kill me to cover his ass."

Vince blinked. "He'd kill you?"

"Gabriel's not big on betrayal." Alisha shook his head as he turned away from Vince. Just looking at the raccoon had become difficult. *This* was what he'd probably sacrificed his life for? "Something we both have in common. So I'm dead, he knows you're on to him, and he goes to his backup plan and sics his assassin on *you* instead." He glared back over his shoulder. "And if *my* death and your death aren't enough incentive, you're not his only target."

"Who else is he after?" Vince asked.

Alisha rolled his eyes as he turned back around. "I don't *know*. Jesus, Vince; keep up. I've already given you everything I have. You have to make a choice." He marched over to the raccoon and reached into his suit pocket and grabbed the thumb drive still there as Vince recoiled in surprise. "Oh, and *this*. I don't know what's on it that's so important, but Gabriel wanted it planted on you. So... probably for the best that you *don't* get caught with it, or with any trace of you on it."

As the fox tucked the drive back into his purse, the raccoon shrugged. "There wasn't anything on it, anyway."

Alisha blinked as he frowned at Vince. "You *checked* it?" he asked, as new dread began to rise through him.

But Vincent held up a paw. "I'm not an idiot, Alan. I took the laptop off the internet... hell, I took it off the office network before I plugged that thing in. There was nothing on it. Nothing happened."

"Yeah, well... that was still stupid. Especially with everything going on. Everything I've warned you about." Alisha continued to frown as he glanced down at his purse. The drive had been able to steal all of Rodney Anderson's personal information from the moment it was plugged into *his* laptop. Maybe he should get one of his other hacker contacts to take a look at it on the down-low.

Even as the fox decided that it wasn't worth the risk, he looked back up to Vince. The raccoon's eyes had not left him, and his face was completely inscrutable. "What? What is it? Come to your senses yet? Finally sunk in how *fucked* you are? How fucked *we* are?"

He shook his head as he took another step back. "Why are you doing this?" he asked as he motioned to the fox's purse. "Seriously. You're mixed up in some criminal scheme to take me down, I get that, but... why help me?"

Breath hissed out of Alisha through clenched teeth as he fought back the instinctive, angry response. "Because you don't deserve to have your whole world ripped apart."

"And you did?"

There it was. That was the question, rhetorical though it was, that peeled Alisha back. He felt his real self exposed to the cool night air for a moment before he composed himself again, but Alisha could see in Vince's eyes that he'd seen it. It was the guilt on the raccoon's face that told him everything he needed to know. "This isn't about the past, Vincent."

But the raccoon snorted. "I don't believe that and neither do you. If I hadn't hurt you so badly, you wouldn't have become... *this*. I did this to you. Me, Alan. Not whoever you think made you. Me. This is all about the past. All about yours and mine. Shit, you even *said* he brought you on because it would be revenge for you, and you've already tried to get that for yourself."

"And I didn't," Alisha growled back.

“And that’s why I know it’s not because of what I deserve. If it was that simple, you *would* have torn me apart, and you’d have been right to do it.” The raccoon drew himself up tall and straight as he stared right into the fox’s eyes. “Somehow... you still love me.”

At that, Alisha scoffed. “I think you’re reading the wrong message in that goodbye letter,” he grumbled.

“I think you’re still a romantic at heart,” Vince continued with a shake of his head. “I don’t think you’ve ever lost that. You love me, and you used to *love* being in love. I don’t think that Alan’s gone. I just think you bury him under Alisha.”

“I bury a lot of guys under Alisha.” He smirked back at Vince. “Alan wouldn’t be alone there.”

But the raccoon shrugged. “And this is what you really want? Life of crime? Conning people, meaningless sex, and nothing to really call home? No stability? No love?”

“You seem to think I’m a lot sappier than I am, Vince,” Alisha replied. He frowned at the raccoon. Was he for real?

It seemed as though he was. He shrugged back at Alisha and gave a sad smile. “I don’t think I destroyed you. Not completely. Why else would you even be helping me? You still care... and you still have to do what you feel is the right thing. You’re a romantic. This is just how you express it right now.”

Irritation flashed through the fox. Who was Vince to psycho-analyze *him*? “You haven’t got me cornered and at a disadvantage this time, Vince. You haven’t got me surprised and confused and flustered, and you don’t get to tell me what I feel. This is me in control, and I’ll tell you for a *fact* that I’m not in love with you anymore.”

“This is you in control?” The raccoon perked an eyebrow. He smirked when Alisha growled at him again and nodded. “Alright, fair. Maybe you’re not in love anymore, but I am. I never stopped loving you, Alan. Not ever.”

“And that’s not going to play with me this time either, Vince,” Alisha replied as he buried his face in his paws. “I don’t care. Alright? I don’t care about how you feel about me. Whatever I feel for you doesn’t matter either, whether it’s the doe-eyed shit you seem to think it is or the hate that you justly deserve.”

The smirk returned to Vince’s face. “I think you’d make a pretty good doe actually, with the right makeup.”

“The point is that I’m trying to protect you,” Alisha continued. Was this a game to him? “You know what’s going on as well as I do now. If you can protect yourself from the con long enough, I might be able to see who’s pulling the strings behind this. If I can do that and get you the evidence you need, you can pull them all apart.” He snorted. “I bet it’ll play well in the media, too. Golden boy or not, you’re only polling five points ahead, aren’t you?”

The raccoon groaned as he leaned back and closed his eyes. “Ugh, *please*. Go back to the threats against my life and career; I’m so over talking politics tonight.”

That was classic Vince, and the sight of him breaking through to the surface actually brought a smile to Alisha’s face. He quickly squashed it, though not before Vince could open his eyes and catch a brief glimpse of it. “What was that?”

“Shut up.” Alisha shook his head.

“That was a smile.”

“I said shut up.”

“You *actually* just smiled, and it wasn’t part of your con.”

“Vince.”

“Feels like one of those ‘once in a blue moon’ things, except-”

“Vincent!” Once more Alisha buried his head in his paws and sighed. “This isn’t a joke. This isn’t some movie or crime TV show or whatever. This is real life, and if you’re not

careful you're not getting the happy ending that you want." He frowned as the raccoon perked an eyebrow, and then sighed as he began to smile. "*Not* what I meant."

"Seemed to be, last time you were over at my place," Vince pointed out.

New anger surged to the surface as Alisha began to glare at the raccoon. "Fine. Make your jokes at my expense. Whatever. I'm going back to my suite to try and keep this con going so you don't wind up shot. You take your potshots at me all you like." He whirled on one footpaw and started away. Vince could shout his smartass remarks at the fox's back for all he cared.

A grab to his wrist however stalled him out and yanked him back, firm enough to draw him in but not so rough as to hurt. Alisha's muzzle open to protest, but Vincent's arms wrapped tight around him before he could speak. He froze up as Vincent held him close.

"I'm sorry, Alan," he said, his voice somewhat muffled by the fox's shoulder. "Thank you for what you're doing."

It was with a sigh that Alisha wrapped one of his arms around the raccoon and squeezed him back. "Now was that so hard?" he asked as he pried himself out of Vince's arms. He fought back a shiver; Vince's scent had been briefly, pleasantly pervasive. Lingering would have done him no good.

When he looked up at Vince's face again, the raccoon just looked concerned again. "What are you going to do now, Alan?"

"Now... I need to get back and get some sleep. Here." Alisha dipped a paw back into his purse and grabbed the cell phone there. "You're gonna want this. Burner phone from my private stash. If it rings, you pick it up, alright? It'll only be me." He frowned as he watched Vincent take the phone. "Or... some Indian guy who really, really needs to get in contact with someone named Girish."

Vince chuckled as he hefted the phone and then slid it into one of his pockets. "I'll keep an eye out for Girish."

Alisha shook his head and sighed. "Just... be careful. Okay? Don't call me. Don't even *mention* me. Any heat you put on me means I can't keep you safe. *Either* of us safe," he corrected himself as Vince's smile turned sly.

"Don't call you, you'll call me. Got it." He patted the pocket he'd placed the phone in and cocked his head. "Do *me* a favor, though?"

The fox groaned. "I *promise* if I learn something, you'll be the first to know."

But Vince just shook his head. "No, not that. Be careful... okay? Seriously."

One of Alisha's eyebrows lifted as he perked an ear. "Oh, good. Because I was going to go out of my way to get myself killed."

"No. Seriously." He reached out again and gently took one of Alisha's paws in a tight grip. "I never knew what happened to you. Then you just burst back into my life last year, and everything was crazy, and..." He moved in slowly, waited for the fox to not pull away, and finally planted a gentle kiss on Alisha's forehead. "Now I know you're still out there... I don't know what I'd do if something happened to you."

There was no fighting the shiver that ran through the fox that time, and he simply closed his eyes and allowed it to run through him before he took a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah, well... I've done just fine these years without you." He tried a smile as he disengaged from the raccoon.

"That makes one of us." As he stepped back, Vince began to nervously wring his paws. The fox hadn't seen him do that since they were pre-teens. "Do what you have to do to keep yourself safe, Alan. I... I'll see you later. I hope." He lingered a moment longer, before he turned and started back off into the park.

Alisha watched him fade into the darkness, filled with a mixture of unpleasant emotions. The warmth from Vince that he'd suppressed the whole conversation still

threatened to overwhelm him. His scent lingered in Alisha's nose. An idle paw rubbed the fox's arm where Vince had held him.

The sound of tires screeching on tarmac lifted Alisha's head and drew him out of his feelings. The momentary thought that it was some drunk driver taking a corner too fast was vanquished as the top of the park's trees became lit with flashes of red and blue light. Fear overrode the rest of the fox's feelings as he looked around. The park wasn't too large, but there were several avenues of escape.

But before he could even take a step, the distant cry of, "Freeze!" reached his ears. They swiveled toward the sound and Alisha turned his head, but the cry had come from further away than he could see. It wasn't him they were after! Relief replaced fear for a moment, before suspicion wormed its way into his mind. If not here for him, who were they there for? The park had been empty!

For the first time in his life, Alisha started *toward* the flashing lights of police cars. He crept through the dark as quickly as he dared and neared the sounds. It wasn't until he heard Vince's confused voice shout, "What are you doing? What's this about!?" that the fox felt his blood run cold.

Finally he peeked around one of the bushes that hid the scene from view, and Alisha had to bite his tongue to keep himself from crying out. There was Vince, being led from one of the park exits he'd left toward. Two uniformed officers escorted him toward a trio of police cars, one of his arms held by each of the officers. Alisha almost stepped out of the bushes, but forced himself to remain still. He couldn't do anything. Not without knowing what was happening.

From around one of the police cruisers emerged a tall buck, not in uniform like the others. Alisha watched him approach the raccoon, who'd begun to struggle somewhat against the officers that held him. "Vincent Terrel?" the buck asked, his voice curious and higher pitched than Alisha would have expected from his imposing presence.

"I am," he said as the officers that flanked the raccoon finally released his arms. Vince smoothed down his suit as he looked up at the taller deer. "And apologies if I'm a little irritable. These two just grabbed me and hauled me over, so I'm not in the best mood right now."

The buck's expression didn't change. "I don't think I'm about to make it any better, Mister Terrel," he replied as he reached into his coat. From it he withdrew a badge that flashed in the red and blue light. "Detective Troy Cassidy, Fourth Precinct."

"Very nice to meet you, detective," Vince said as he stared at the badge. Alisha winced; the raccoon was being given as long a look as he wanted. This wasn't Gabriel's doing; a fake badge didn't hold up to intense scrutiny in the long term. This detective was the real deal, which meant... "Might I ask what exactly you want with me?"

You absolutely can," Cassidy replied. He carefully replaced his badge inside his coat pocket and reached into another to pull out a pair of cuffs. "I'm sorry to say that it's about your wife, Congressman.

"You're under arrest for Margaret Terrel's murder."