

Calm down, Mitch. It'll be okay.

Mitch ran a hand through their hair, and around their antlers. The door to Zee's apartment might have well have been electrified considering Mitch's avoidance of knocking. They kicked a toe against the welcome mat, one of those homey hand-woven deals in a varied range of blues and purples. It looked new, considering the fibers still stood straight and untrampled. Mitch contemplated the mat for a good minute before even thinking about knocking on the door again.

This is your last out, they thought, fidgeting with the hem of their shirt. Mitch chose the casual red dress shirt specifically because it hid their curved natural waist; on the drive over, however, all Mitch could think about was that it still clung too tightly to their torso. Mitch then lost another minute to tugging the shirt left while moving their torso right, then shirt right and torso left. No matter which way they moved, it still felt too tight, too feminine.

You could go home, Mitch mused, shooting a glance down the open-air hallway to the parking lot. Just a few hundred feet away their passably new silver Camry glinted in the dying light, a lighthouse guiding them away from their nervousness and paranoia.

"No," Mitch said aloud, treating their inner thoughts as an argument partner. "You promised Zee you'd come over for dinner, and that's just what you're going to do. Now...knock."

Mitch curled their hand into a light fist, and hesitated with knuckles mere centimeters from the door. They took a deep breath in and knocked three times. They immediately took a step away from the door, off the new door mat, and waited. The silence in the hallway was near-deafening, and Mitch passed the stretching seconds by bouncing on their toes. Their black boots squeaked with the bending, which made Mitch self-conscious. The bouncing quickly stopped.

After thirty seconds (or an age), the doorknob clicked gently and turned, and Zee's smiling lupine face appeared. His fur was the color of storm clouds, which was something Mitch commented upon on their first date. Mitch never could get the likeness out of their mind.

"Mitch! Fantastic, you're here. Did you find the place all right? I know I live out of the way but it's really convenient for work--come in! Ah, look at me standing here, come in, come in," Zee blustered, stepping out of the doorway to wave Mitch in.

Mitch ducked to avoid antler-door jamb collision and slid past Zee to the far side of the hallway. The entrance opened up there into a large common space: a combination living room, kitchenette and laundry (inset into a closet). Considering that Zee lived in an apartment, it was surprisingly spacious. Mitch stood at the threshold of the living room, a new wave of nervousness washing over them.

"Make yourself at home. Dinner's almost ready, do you want some wine?" Zee wormed past Mitch with just the smallest brush to their shoulder. Mitch twitched, but a smile tugged their lips up.

"Wine would be nice. Red?"

"Is there any other?" Zee grinned goofily and snagged a glass from a hanging rack. The wine was already opened and breathing, so quick work was made of filling two glasses. Zee, in all his wolfish charm, was in his work clothes--a fair pink dress shirt, untucked, with grey slacks. His shoes were off, leaving him in just some socks stitched with tiny seahorses. Mitch stifled a giggle, and took a glass.

"Take your shoes off, pop a squat. I don't have any formal eating area, I hope that's okay. I'm a bit of a bachelor," Zee said while swirling his wine.

"Well, aren't we both?" Mitch said. They were attempting to take their shoes off while keeping the glass of wine in their hand. After a few seconds of futile effort, Mitch set the glass down on the floor and made quick work of their boots. Snatching the glass back up, they took a

drink while standing and nearly breathed in wine. Freezing mid-rise, Mitch forced themselves not to cough, and swallowed the mouthful like one might swallow semi-cooled lava. In a word, pained.

Zee, to Mitch's happiness, did not see this--he was too worried with what was going on in the oven. The smell of something savory and umami slinked out of the cracked oven door before Zee shut it again. Mitch sensed that Zee was very proud of himself.

"You said you were vegetarian," Zee said, "So I figured I'd try my hand at lasagna with eggplant and tofu. I made it once before."

"That sounds...really good, actually. Do you cook a lot?" Mitch was now sitting in an IKEA-like chair, the cushions having a bold, modern floral print. It was the closest to the kitchen, so they could talk to Zee with some ease.

"I try to. It's not always what I *want* to do after a day of work, but it does make me happy. More when I'm doing it for others," Zee said, leaning against a counter. He flashed Mitch a small smile as punctuation.

Mitch ran a finger over the rim of their wine glass and nodded. Maybe it was the comment, maybe it was the smile, but Mitch felt themselves blushing. They attempted to hide it, but from the way Zee chuckled then, it was clear they didn't do a very good job of it. Zee walked over and put a hand on Mitch's head, rubbing their hair up and stroking between those almost ostentatious antlers.

"Are these new?" Zee commented.

"Ah! I, yeah, they just came in," Mitch stammered, putting a hand up to rub at the base of one of them."

"I like them, they suit you. You'll have to show me how they attach sometime. What they look like off, too."

"O...oh, I--"

"Oh, shit," Zee said, taking a step back and rubbing a hand over his face. "I'm sorry, that was out of line, wasn't it?"

"No! I mean, maybe, but I know what you meant." Mitch waved a hand in the air, then bit their lip and returned to staring at their wine.

"I'm real sorry, Mitch. Your antlers look great, really, I just--" Zee started to say, but was cut off by a tinny buzzer. He turned around, and there was an unheard sigh of relief at the food's doneness interrupting his faux pas. With Pac-Man oven mitts on his hands, Zee focused on pulling the lasagna out of the oven. The dish's contents bubbled beautifully, and Zee left it to cool while pulling a plate of garlic bread out of the overhead microwave.

A quick rummage through the fridge for a bag of salad greens, and Zee was plating dinner for himself and Mitch. He moved like a professional even in the tight kitchenette space, snatching plates from a cabinet and balancing them on fingertips while cutting the lasagna. Mitch marveled at how in his element Zee was right now, a smile re-forming across their maw.

"Kitchen le Loup proudly presents! Vegetarian lasagna, garlic bread, and salad. Do you want dressing? What kind of dressing?" Zee flourished the plate at Mitch, who took it gratefully.

"Any vinaigrette you have'll be fine."

A bottle of rosy oil was in Mitch's face immediately, and as they poured it into their salad, the faint smell of raspberries wafted upward. Putting the bottle down beside their feet, Mitch tucked into the food, working from salad to lasagna.

Sitting on the couch not two feet away from Mitch, Zee took small bites while watching his date expectantly. After the stumble, Zee was clearly eager for the night to take an upswing; his face brightened considerably when Mitch took the first bite of lasagna, then immediately dove into the rest.

"Holy shit, Zee, this is amazing. I haven't had food this good outside of a restaurant...well, ever," Mitch admitted through a full maw.

"Thanks! I...do you not cook much for yourself?"

"No, I--" Mitch took a moment to finish chewing, "--am terrible in a kitchen, unless the only ingredients are boiled water and time."

"So, college food," Zee smirked.

"Exactly."

Mitch and Zee worked to clean their plates off, eating in a comfortable silence. After a quick scrape to get the last of the sauce off their plate, Mitch put the plate on their legs and leaned back in their seat. A smile stretched across their maw, satisfied and warm. Even when Zee rose and took that plate off of Mitch's lap, they kept their slightly slouched and clearly comfortable position.

"Seconds?" Zee queried.

"No, I'm at a good level of full. Any more and I'll be terrible company."

Zee nodded knowingly, and rinsed both plates off. Mitch rose laboriously to their feet, with the now empty glass of wine, and wandered to the edge of the kitchen's linoleum.

"Thank you. That was really delicious," they said.

"Don't mention it. More wine?" Zee was already refilling his glass. Mitch just nodded and held out their own, which Zee diligently topped off. They stood there for a moment, taking sips of wine and enjoy the pleasant afterglow of the meal.

"So..." Mitch said, quietly.

"I have Netflix, wanna watch a dumb horror movie?"

"Yes."

"Why are blondes in horror movies absolute idiots?" Mitch spat out.

"Because of a series of widely-propagated beliefs that blondes are dumb, along with the fact that, as the archetypal sexy one, they have to die because of loose morals."

"Besides that."

"Also because we're watching a terrible slasher movie, Mitch," Zee chuckled sharply.

Turning to look at Mitch, Zee admired them in the half-light glow of the television. The movie was in its final act, with scream queens getting mowed down one by one. In the hour of the first two acts, Mitch had slid close enough on the couch that Zee could, if he wanted to, put his arm around his date.

So he did.

Mitch stiffened up, eyes widening. To say they were a deer in the headlights would be terribly cliché, but also entirely correct at this moment. With their breathing picking up the pace a notch, Mitch turned to look Zee right in the eyes.

"Sorry, am I being too forward?" Zee said, ears flattening back on his head.

Mitch shook their head. They contemplated the situation at hand for a moment, then slid the final few centimeters close. Mitch's hip pressed against Zee's, which made Zee break into that goofy smile. Mitch smiled in return and, as if their date might disappear if they moved too quickly, slid their arm around Zee.

"I think I'd like to kiss you, Mitch," Zee rumbled, but didn't act on his words. He waited instead, though his free hand did move to rest on Mitch's knee. It neither felt, nor looked like a predatory act; it merely acknowledged the closeness of the two bodies.

"I think," Mitch started, then stopped, then took a breath. "I think I'd like that."

Within a breath, Zee's lips were on Mitch's. Curling their fingers up a little, Mitch moved their free arm to rest on Zee's other side, both an act of wanting and a safety measure. That arm was welcoming, but fully locked, unconsciously keeping Zee at arm's length.

The kiss lasted long enough to be punctuated by an overwrought scream from one of the actresses. Zee pulled away first, smile soft and warm. He transferred the hand on Mitch's leg to their cheek, stroking his thumb slowly as he stared into their eyes, followed the lines of their face.

"You're very handsome, Mitch," Zee said, punctuating it with a second kiss (shorter, but more adamant). He held his maw close once they parted, and then began a trail of kisses down Mitch's chin toward their throat and up the side of their neck. Mitch instinctively pushed at Zee's sides, lip caught between his teeth.

Zee jerked upward to stare at Mitch, his face scrunched in worry. The two of them sat in silence momentarily, with Zee turning almost immediately to stare at the film again. The most virginal of the film's stars was making an actual blow to the murderer, effectively stopping the horror that had befallen her friends. There was a tense silence in the room as the final few minutes of the movie played out.

With credits rolling and Netflix trying to suggest a second movie to watch, Mitch wrapped their arms around their body and let out a loud sigh.

"Zee, I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"For being nervous."

Zee's head whipped so quickly toward Mitch that his ears didn't even turn fast enough, having to catch up with the rest of him. He bridged the distance to his date, wrapping both arms around Mitch and resting his maw on their shoulder.

"That is not worth being sorry for. I want you to be comfortable and happy. However much I want you, I want you to be nerves-free more."

Raising his maw, Zee planted a single kiss on Mitch's cheek and grinned.

"I'm not going to pressure you one bit, Mitch. Now...I'm going to go to the bathroom."

Patting Mitch's side, Zee pushed up from the couch and moved carefully around the coffee table. The wolf disappeared down the hallway that led to the bathroom and bedroom, leaving Mitch alone with their own thoughts. Mitch slumped on the couch and breathed a ragged sigh, slapping their hands to their face and rubbing the heels of their palms into their eyes.

"He *likes* you, Mitch. Why're you being so weird. You've gone over with him about...everything, why does it bother you. Why does it bother you," Mitch muttered under their breath, grinding their hands against their full face now. It was frustrating, Mitch thought they were ready for this. And, honestly....

Mitch really *liked* Zee, too. In a whirlwind of questions, internal and external, Zee was a rock. Zee was unwavering in his support for Mitch: Zee was curious, cautious, but not constricting. When the feelings of confusion, of aimlessness came over Mitch, Zee was there to pick them up. As slow as the courtship was going, due to time, jobs, and obligations, Zee always seemed to be there. And what's more, Zee seemed to be there for all the right reasons.

Reaching out, Mitch grabbed the mostly empty bottle of red wine and, eschewing a glass entirely, chugged the rest of the booze down. They sat the bottle between their legs, drumming against the neck with nervous, agitated energy. Leaning their head back, Mitch let out a sigh and knocked their head once or twice on the back couch cushion. Their antlers tittupped against the wall, which caused Mitch to freeze in thought.

Mitch rose upright and scooted to the edge of the couch. Putting their hands on the bases of their antlers, they fingered the bases and caressed the small, twistable rings close to

their skull. They torqued their left one first, twisting it counter-clockwise. Mitch could hear a gentle grinding in their head as metal shifted on metal as the bolt unscrewed. As it grew loose, the antler base clicked and clattered lightly, and Mitch moved their other hand to twine against some of the branches.

As easily as one might change out an attachment on an electric drill, Mitch pulled the large antler off their head and set it down on the coffee table. What was left in its place was a threaded metal bolt, a dull cone shape, with a sub-dermal anchor. It had been a very painful day at the piercing shop, but Mitch's modder had her own implanted rows of horns, so they had trusted her completely.

Mitch did much the same detachment process with their other antler, and laid it in tandem with the first. They spent a moment running their hands through their hair and around those threaded metal bumps, almost making sure they still existed.

Staring at those unattached appendages, Mitch felt the urge to put them back on bubbling up their throat, but fought it. This was the litmus test, the trial by fire. If they could get past this nervous feeling with Zee, they could handle anything that'd happen after.

The soft glow and sharp darkening from the hallway heralded Zee's return. Padding to the living room, Zee nearly didn't notice anything had changed until he went to grab for the bottle of wine and saw the two antlers lying there. Stopping in his tracks, Zee looked to Mitch, who was clinging to a pillow in nervousness. Looking down at the ground, Mitch's cheeks, even the low Netflix ambiance, were clearly reddened with a blush.

"You wanted to see, right?"

Zee leaned down to touch one of the antlers, almost not believing they were laying there. Filing away the oddness of seeing disembodied antlers on his coffee table for later, Zee only lingered on them for a brief second. He moved quickly to the couch, sitting back down next to Mitch.

"So?" Mitch said breathlessly.

Not even responding, Zee wrapped his arms around Mitch and kissed them again. His arms locked around that waist, squeezing Mitch slightly as the kiss grew in passion and abandon. Zee's tail thumped on the couch, subtly announcing his pleasure in being so close to such a handsome creature.

This time, Mitch didn't feel quite so nervous. Extracting the pillow from between their bodies, Mitch slid their arms around Zee in return. Their breath exited raggedly through their nose, mimicking the gentle quiver running through Mitch's entire body. Zee's hands didn't stay terribly demure for long, sliding their way down and around Mitch's hips. His fingers wriggled their way just under that red dress shirt, teasing the fur just above Mitch's pants.

Mitch locked their body, but Zee broke the kiss and stared directly into their eyes.

"Your body is beautiful, Mitch. I just want to enjoy it all. Is that okay?"

"...Yes."

Zee's smile widened before he resumed the kiss, head canted to the right to engage more of Mitch's maw with his own. His hands moved around Mitch's torso, using both fingerpads and claws to tease little secret messages into Mitch's fur. Those digits meandered their way up, against the slight curve of Mitch's natural waist, then further north, stopping at the border of fur and Ace bandages that wrapped around Mitch's upper torso. The hesitation was a test of comfort, but when Zee did not feel a physical retraction from Mitch, he continued on, hands splaying across their chest, circling round and under their arms. Zee finally let his hands rest on the peaks of Mitch's shoulder blades, pivoting at the wrist to rub on the outskirts of their spine.

Zee coaxed Mitch back on the couch while moving his kissing away from their lips. His maw made its way under Mitch's chin and down their neck. Breathing hot and heavy, Zee

pressed his mouth to the first button on Mitch's shirt and, by what could only be called a sexual party trick, flicked it open. Button by button, Zee moved his way down until the shirt was half-open. He looked up to Mitch to check in. Mitch just nodded for Zee to continue.

The shirt slid open and off of Mitch's torso, and if there was any lingering worry of Zee being put off by Mitch's body, the ring of kisses he placed on their stomach helped a lot. Making a deep-chest growl, Zee rested his chin on Mitch's stomach while he caressed his hands downward to their hips again, giving them a soft squeeze.

"You're the most handsome person I've ever known, Mitch. You still okay?"

Mitch didn't have to think too long, their mouth melting into a big, broad grin.

"I've never been more comfortable."