

If Only He'd Been Born On April 25th

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Thomas kicked his apartment door closed behind him with a sigh. He dropped his keys into the dish by the door then shrugged out of his coat, tossing it across the back of the nearest chair as he walked through the silent rooms. He pulled up at his shirt tails as he made his way to the kitchen, his hooves clacking against the tile with a soft *tick tick tick* as he worked his fingers over the buttons down the front of his chest. His shirt fell to the ground as he opened the fridge, pulling out the first beer he saw, and rummaged through the second drawer to the left of the sink until he found the bottle opener he knew was there. The cap came off with a slight hiss, and he gave the beer a quick sniff before chugging the first half of the bottle right there, in the middle of the kitchen as he leaned against the counter. He reached back into the fridge and grabbed a second bottle and walked back past the half-wall separating the living room and the kitchen and sat down on the couch with a grunt. He finished the first bottle as he sat there, alone, and set it next to the rest of the empty bottles gathering at the foot of his couch as he moved on to nurse his second for the night.

When the second bottle joined the first, he buried his head in his hands and breathed out a heavy sigh. How long had this been his nights, what he had to look forward to after a long day's work? Just darkness and silence and beer – how long had it been like this? Weeks? Months? Couldn't have been months, Francis only left back in January, back when his semester first started. But it was April, now, Thomas remembered. Had it really been months?

Thomas looked through his fingers at the pictures on the walls. He looked at the smiles, the laughter, the joy in the faces of the lithe little muntjac and the chubby cougar – the moments frozen in time and framed in cheap pine as a reminder of love past. Thomas pulled his phone out of his pocket and scrolled through his album lists until he found the one he was looking for and pulled the first picture up. The image of a naked cougar filled his screen, but it wasn't the image he knew Francis for. The Francis he knew was shy, hesitant, insecure – the sheer amount of trust it took for him to just take his shirt off around Thomas made the deer pull him into one of the deepest kisses they'd ever had to date, and their first truly intimate night together left the cougar weeping into Thomas' chest, sobbing deeply between his words as he professed he never expected to have a chance with somebody like Thomas. The Francis he knew would smile at him timidly whenever he woke up next to him. The Francis he knew would try to sneak little kisses throughout the day then dart off before Thomas had any time to react. The Francis he knew would slink up behind him and just hold him, whispering his love into the muntjac's ear as he nibbled along Thomas' antlers.

But the Francis on his screen was something different. He'd lost the weight within the first few years, and had started to really tone up within the last few months. His fur shone much sleeker, now, and laid itself flat against his taut muscles. The cougar's arms and shoulders bulged, and his stomach was flat – a little flab, maybe, but no less than a quarter of an inch just around his lower stomach – and while his chest was not quite chiseled, his pecs were nothing to scoff at. His face was thinner, too, and his cheekbones stood out against his eyes where fat and fur fluff used to obscure them. His body had changed, and while Thomas had to admit the newer pictures left him far more satisfied in his private moments than the older ones did, there was one thing that stood out more than anything the cougar's time at the gym had changed.

Thomas tapped the 'home' button on his phone and brought up the messaging client. He scrolled down to Francis' name and tapped out a quick message.

Me: Are you busy? [10:32 PM]

He threw his phone down next to him and pulled his undershirt off, throwing it over the mess of empty bottles next to him. He scooted to the center of the couch and sprawled out on his back, resting his phone on his bare stomach as he waited. He folded his arms behind his head as he stared up at the ceiling, counting the dots as he tried to will the stench of alcohol from his nose.

He was up to one hundred and thirty-seven when the phone vibrated against his stomach.

Francis: Kinda. Y? [10:38 PM]

Thomas held the phone up to his face as he typed.

Me: I had a rough day. I really just need to hear your voice. [10:39 PM]

Francis: Right now? im in a study group [10:43 PM]

Me: Just 5-10 minutes. Please. [10:44 PM]

Francis: Can u like wait 30 min? [10:49 PM]

Me: I have work at 6:30 tomorrow. [10:50 PM]

Francis: Its not even 10 yet man. Chill [10:55 PM]

Thomas sighed.

Me: You're an hour behind me, remember? [10:57 PM]

Francis: Fine. Gimme like 5 min [11:01 PM]

Thomas let his phone fall to his chest as he pressed his fingers to his eyes. There was a tightness in his throat, and the beer was starting to settle in his gut and make his tiredness seem all that more pressing.

Me: Never mind. I'll just sleep it off. [11:03 PM]

He tossed his phone onto the coffee table next to him and curled up onto his side facing away from the table, pressing his nose into the back of the couch. He breathed in deeply, trying to find even the faintest remnant of the cougar's scent buried deep in the fabric and stuffing, but he found nothing. The couch just smelled of him and beer and the staleness of the air around him. He wanted something – anything – to remind him of the man he fell in love with, but everywhere he looked left him wanting. His clothes just smelled of detergent, the bathroom of deer musk, the carpet of beer, and their bed of all three. Even the pictures felt hollow, now – reflections and pale echoes of what was.

He was about to fall asleep when the sound of his ringtone cut through the silence. Thomas let out a bark of surprise and tried to twist around on the couch, but his antlers snagged on the fabric and he fell to the floor with another bark. He scrambled to his knees and grabbed his phone on the third ring, and held it up to his face with a groan. "Hello?"

"Tommy?"

Thomas' chest swelled. "Hey, Frankie."

“You okay? You don’t sound too good.”

“Yeah,” Thomas said. “I just, uh ...” he pushed himself back up to the couch with a grunt and waved towards the floor. “Nothing. But, hey! How’s studying going?”

“I had to cut the session short,” Francis said. “Sent all the guys back to their dorms so I could call.”

Thomas felt the heat rise in his face. “You didn’t have to send them away.”

“You sounded distressed, and we were studying for a test we have tomorrow. Sleep’s better than cramming, right?”

“Yeah,” Thomas said. “I guess.”

“Besides,” Francis said. “One of the guys really needs to pass this test to get an ‘A,’ and I’ve been making sure to give him some special attention all week. I’m hoping to see how ‘grateful’ he is when he gets that ‘A,’ ya know? Have some more intimate ‘special attention’ than hunching over books and reviewing test packets. And, you know, if he knew I had a boyfriend back home he might be hesitant.” Thomas could hear the purr in the cougar’s throat. “Don’t want to hurt my chances too much.”

“I guess,” Thomas said. His chest tightened at the thought. They agreed to be open while Francis was away, but the thought never really settled well with him. Sure, he made the suggestion, but that was back when Francis first left. Back before he’d slimmed down and gained confidence. Thomas was almost certain Francis would hear the waiver in his voice, but if he did the cougar didn’t let on that he cared.

“I’m not too worried, though.” There was the sound of papers shuffling on the other end. “I did the math, and I’d have to fail this test with a twenty-four before it could even drop my grade down to a ‘B.’ I’m set in this class for the semester!”

“Awesome,” Thomas said. He realized his voice was flat and somewhat distant, but he didn’t think Francis did.

“And all my other classes, naturally,” Francis went on. “There’s only one I might getta ‘B’ in, but the professor’s a dick so it’s *not* my fault. Did I tell you about the paper I turned in to my Bio class?”

“I don’t think so,” Thomas said.

“So, get this,” Francis said. “Did all the research, did all the observation, did all the extra *bullshit* stuff he said to do if we wanted a boost to the grade – and I worked my ass off, let me tell you – and he dropped my grade down to an eighty because he said my grammar was ‘atrocious!’ As if this were some English paper!”

Thomas looked over at the pictures again while Francis went on. He tried to focus, but after a while Thomas couldn’t hold his attention to whatever the cougar was complaining about now. So he kept himself occupied by staring at the picture of Francis carrying a massive plush cougar on his shoulders and wearing that goofy, lopsided grin that always made Thomas giggle. Francis had won it for him at the carnival almost three years ago, spending close to twenty bucks at the same stupid game just “to win his deer something.” When he finally won it, he shoved it into Thomas’ arms and planted a firm kiss on the muntjac’s muzzle, firm and passionate, and fueled with a sense of accomplishment. He said he wanted something for his Tommy to

remember him by while he was gone, and when he said it his whole face seemed to light up with that warm, genuine smile that always made Thomas just melt. It was his eyes, Thomas remembered, that had the most warmth and love in them. He still had the plush sitting on his bed, right next to where he slept most nights.

"It just pisses me off," Francis continued on. "I mean, Biology paper! Who cares if I accidentally put in some text lingo here and there as shorthand? It's not like bio or English is my major or anything."

"Maybe he has a point?" Thomas finally spoke up. "I mean, if it's hard to read and looks unprofessional, then I guess I could understand."

"I can't believe you're taking his side," Francis hissed.

"I-I'm not," Thomas said. "I mean, maybe a whole letter grade's a bit much, but ..."

"Ten points, max!" There was a loud thump on the other end of the line. "Whatever, though. It won't hurt my GPA too much, even if he does screw me of my four-point-oh." Francis sighed. There was another thump from the other line, and then the sound of pages rustling to the floor. "So, what's been up with you, anyways? You said work sucked?"

"Yeah," Thomas said. "Well, no. I mean, no more than usual."

"What does that mean?"

"You know," Thomas said. "Working retail. Dealing with customers. The usual stress. Work's really not been anything new."

"Then what's eating ya?"

Thomas tore his eyes away from the pictures and looked up at the ceiling again. "I just ... I miss you."

"Aww," Francis said. "I miss you too, hon."

"It's more than just missing you, though," Thomas said. "I just ... I dunno, I can't bring myself to do anything anymore. I can't go out to eat because I feel so alone, I can't hang out with friends because they always bring their wives or husbands, and I can't even go shopping anymore without it just feeling pointless. Like, what am I doing any of this for, anymore? Why am I buying new clothes if you're not going to see them, or why should I buy new plates when *one's* all I need?"

"Don't talk like that," Francis said harshly.

"I'm just being honest," Thomas sighed.

"I don't care," Francis snapped. "Don't ever talk like that. Do you know what it'd do to me if you did something to yourself?"

There was a fire that sparked in the back of Thomas' mind. "Would you even know or care? It's not like you text or call all that often." He snorted. "Hell, I could die, and you wouldn't know for we--"

"Stop!" Francis' voice cracked. "H-how can you say that? Of course I care! I care more about you than anything else in this world, Tommy."

That was the Francis Thomas fell in love with. "What about your degree?"

Francis hesitated a moment. "Close second. I need it to come home and take care of you."

"But it's more important right now?"

"It has to be," Francis said. "I have to ... I have to think long term. I have to think about our future. The degree's just a piece of paper, what's more important than you *right now* is *us* in the future."

"I guess," Thomas said. He didn't agree, but he didn't want to argue.

"So ... please." There was a soft sniffle on Francis' end. "Please just promise me you won't do anything short-sighted and drastic. Please?"

Thomas glanced down at the empty bottles of beer next to him. "I won't do anything, hon."

"Promise me," Francis said. "Just promise me you won't start hurting yourself."

Thomas squeezed his eyes shut, rubbing his paw over his bare chest. He could feel his ribs starkly against his fingers, and he knew, somewhere deep within the cover of fur, some of the scars running along his arms were rubbing against the fur of his torso. "Francis ..."

"Promise!"

Thomas looked over the half-wall into his kitchen. He couldn't remember the last time he'd actually prepared anything, let alone eaten anything in there. Or at work, now that he thought about it. "I promise," he said, though the promise he really made was to himself, and for him to stop. "I just need you home, Frankie. I can't keep coming home to an empty house."

There was silence from the other line for a few heartbeats. "It'll be soon enough, Tommy."

"Your semester ends next month, right?" Thomas sat up slowly, steadying himself with the arms of the couch as he stumbled around the coffee table. He was careful to not kick any of the empty bottles scattered across the floor. Francis would sure hear that.

"Yeah," Francis said.

"Fifteenth, right?" Thomas looked around the kitchen. He found a month-old bag of ramen in the pantry, and decided it'd do for now.

"The week of the fifteenth," Francis said. He went on to say something else, but Thomas only caught the last half of the sentence as he switched the phone to his other ear. "—on the seventeenth."

"Cool," Thomas said. He smiled faintly as he filled his smallest pot with water and set it on the stove. "So, you can be home by the eighteenth?"

There was another few heartbeats of silence. "I ... could. Yeah."

"Were you planning on staying a bit longer?"

Francis drew in a sharp breath. "You could say that."

Thomas' heart sank. "How much longer? A few days? A week or two?"

"Hon ..."

“A month?” There was no reply. “Two months?” A cold tightness gripped Thomas’ stomach. He had to brace himself against the kitchen sink as his stomach turned, the alcoholic warmth in his gut working its way back up his throat with a sickeningly acidic taste. “Are you coming home at all?”

Francis sighed. “I didn’t know how to tell you, hon.”

Thomas’ vision blurred. “So you just weren’t going to?”

“I was! I just didn’t know how.”

“Why?” Thomas’ voice cracked.

“I signed up for a few summer classes,” Francis said. “They’re offering German IV, and it’s the last language credit I need to get my Bachelor’s degree. The next time they’re offering it is in another year, in the fall after next.”

“Can’t you just take it then?” The taste of bile was strong in Thomas’ mouth.

“I’d have to take at least three other classes with it to have my scholarship work, and by the end of next Spring I’ll have all my core, my electives, and all my major’s classes completed. All except for this language class.” He waited for Thomas to say something else, but when there was nothing but silence on the other end, he went on. “It’s online, and I didn’t think it’d be a problem. I’d just come home, spend an hour on my laptop a day, and that would be that. Except the scholarship requires at least two summer classes for it to apply, and there were no other online classes that fit my plan. I would have gone with an elective, but I’ve already used up my elective hours, and the scholarship won’t keep paying for classes outside my major.”

Francis fell silent again, waiting for Thomas to say something. “Hon? Are you still there?” All he got back in reply was the sound of hacking coughs and the sound of the sink’s faucet. “Hon? Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Thomas said hoarsely. He wiped his chin and mouth with the back of his hand. “I’m fine.”

“Alright,” Francis said. “I can visit when summer classes are over, though. There’s a long weekend between the summer semester and the fall, so I can be home for a few days in August.”

“August,” Thomas said.

“Yeah,” Francis said. “And then, after that, I’ll be home for Christmas.”

“Christmas,” Thomas said.

“Yeah.”

“It’s April,” Thomas said.

“I know.”

His vision blurred again and he fell against the sink, the cold stainless steel pressing into his short, bare fur. “That’s eight months, Francis.”

“With August in between,” Francis said. “Look, Tommy, I love you. I mean it. We can make it through this. We have to think long term.”

“Yeah,” Thomas said. “Long term.” He lifted himself up enough to look over the half-wall and back into the living room. He looked at the pictures again, of the happy, healthy, lithe little deer and his loving, chubby cougar. There was a picture of them hugging, and Thomas strained himself to try and remember the last time he actually felt his lover’s arms around him. “I love you, too.”

At least, he had.

“I’ve gotta go,” Francis said. “I do have a test to pass in the morning.”

“Yeah,” Thomas said. He glanced up at the stove clock and saw that it was past midnight for him. “I should go, too.”

“Get some sleep, hon,” Francis said. “I’ll see you soon.”

“Yeah.” Thomas looked over at the calendar hanging from the fridge. “Soon.”

“And then we can stop being apart,” Francis said. There was a chipper edge to his voice that made Thomas want to vomit again. “Long term.”

“Yeah.” Thomas held back a sigh. “Long term.”

“Hey, look,” Francis said. “I’ll send you some new pictures of me tonight, to keep you company. That sound good?”

There was the briefest stirring in Thomas’ groin at the thought of the – his – cougar naked and aroused. But then he remembered how long it’d been since he touched his own boyfriend’s fur and felt his maleness for himself, and remembered again that in the months he’d been away from Thomas, others had been touching him where once only Thomas’ hands ever went. And, for some reason, that made Thomas feel dirty, as if he were the one Francis was cheating on his lover with.

“Sure,” Thomas said. “Better than nothing.”

“Exactly!” Francis was purring again. “I’ll make them good. And I hope to see reaction pictures in the future.”

Thomas looked down at himself again. “We’ll see.”

“Anyways, I’ll go take these right now,” Francis said. “For now, though, goodnight, Tommy.”

“Night,” Thomas said.

Thomas hit the ‘end’ button and stuffed his phone back into his pocket. He drew in a shaky breath, the stench of his own vomit hitting him as he looked back down into the sink he was still leaning over. With a sigh, he pushed himself away and rubbed the back of his hand against his cheeks, wiping away the now cold tears he hadn’t realized he’d cried that had matted his fur down around his eyes.

He turned off the stove as he passed it and tossed the bag of ramen into the trash. He stopped in front of the fridge, kicking his discarded shirt into the corner, and pulled the first beer he could reach out. He rummaged through the second drawer to the left of the sink, but remembered that he’d left the opener out on the counter and grabbed it from there. He chugged the beer, the bitter liquid mingling with the aftertaste of bile in his mouth, and leaned against the counter for support.

He was five minutes done with his beer when his phone finally buzzed against his thigh. He pulled it out and opened up the new email Francis had just sent with five image attachments. He downloaded them all with little anticipation and opened them one by one mechanically – the first was just his bare front from head to knees, the second was a bit more risqué with him grabbing his groin, the third was him facing away from the camera and bending over his coffee table with his arousal bobbing happily between his thighs, the fourth showed what Thomas knew Francis fully intended to do with that fleshy organ of his, and the fifth and final showed the aftermath of the fourth as he lounged along his couch with his fur matted down around his chest and stomach.

And Thomas had to admit, he liked what he saw. The pains in his stomach and taste in his mouth kept him from truly appreciating his boyfriend's body, but as long as he didn't look above Francis' chin he'd spend many a night enjoying the images in the future.

But his eyes killed it all. His eyes used to be filled with the love he was scared to express, and would allow a glimpse past his insecurities and his doubts to show just how genuine he was with every little blush, every little smile he ever shot towards Thomas. Now? Now they were just cold. Predatory. Lustful. If they Native Americans tribes had it right, and pictures truly did steal the souls of those they depicted, then Francis' soul was laid just as bare before Thomas as his body, and unlike the cougar's physical improvements, Thomas didn't like what he saw in his cougar's eyes.

With a sigh, Thomas pushed himself away from the kitchen counter and staggered forward a few steps. He stood in front of the fridge and flipped forward to the next month. He'd outlined the week of the fifteenth with a red marker and had drawn some hearts around the border – something completely in character months and months ago, but just left him disgusted in himself now. Remembering what Francis had said, he flipped to the back of his calendar and stared at the twenty-fifth of December until the word "Christmas" burned itself into his eyes. A part of him wanted to make some sort of marker, some sort of big, fancy reminder that yes, his cougar would be home then, and everything would be made right! But the other part of him reached up and touched a finger to his cheeks to find that his tears had started to flow anew, and the bitter despair that bubbled up from the depths of his heart made him wonder if things could ever be right again.

Thomas let the calendar pages fall to the current month with a resentful snort. "If only he'd been born on April 25th."