

Blake pulled up to the front of Koray's home; a small house a short bikeride away from the university. All dressed up for a sophisticated evening, the reindeer adjusted his collar and tightened, then loosened his tie for the eighth time. Nervousness showed on Blake's snout, but why though? This was nothing new. He knew perfectly well how dates work. Or did he? With a sigh, Blake got out of his car and went up to the fox's front door. A firm knock and he was standing upright, chest puffed out, like a nervous high school kid before his first prom.

Koray wasn't exactly calm about this either. He'd dated before, plenty of times at all different stages of his life, but it had been a while. And he knew that Blake was different from the rest for no other reason then, well, the reindeer was effectively straight. The fox tried to do something with the tuft of hair atop his head, but nothing he did looked decent, finally giving up as he moved to finish dressing instead.

He was just finishing doing up his bowtie when he heard the knock on his door. His tail puffed up a little in nervousness, but he promptly smoothed it down as he grabbed his keys and wallet and moved to the front door. Opening it, he smiled up at Blake.

"Hi." He found himself greeting, feeling rather like he was getting picked up for his first prom.

"Hello." Blake nodded, his antlers having grown a little more, but still covered in a soft velvet Koray would love to feel on his fingertips. "Are...you ready?"

Koray nodded with a smile. "Yup. Just let me turn out the lights quick." The fox scurried about the house, quickly turning out lights, before slipping out the front door and locking it behind him. "All set."

"Alright." the reindeer nodded and made his way to the car and opened the passenger door for the fox. Blake didn't say anything as Koray approached the large vehicle.

Koray followed after the reindeer, cocking his head at the large vehicle, but finding that it made sense; Blake was a large man that sports a rack of impressive antlers for half the year, so he would need a large vehicle. He was, however, a little surprised as Blake opened the passenger-side door for him. The chivalry made him blush a little.

"Thank you." He said with a smile, moving to climb into the seat.

Blake only managed to nod and clear his throat as he gently closed the door for the cross fox, then hopped over to his driver's side. Engine turned on, parking brake loosened, and Blake drove off. As the reindeer steered the vehicle, his right index finger twitched a little. The silence was heavier than he expected; they were both nervous, and for very similar reasons. But Koray gave a little sigh, realizing he might have to guide things a little more and help put Blake at ease. He noticed the reindeer's twitching finger on the gearshift and, after

hesitating a moment, he reached over and covered the larger hand with his own, offering a small, reassuring smile.

"Blake, relax." The fox said in a gentle voice. "It's really not so different, honest. I mean...I'm not a woman, but it *is* just a first date. I'm not expecting more than a pleasant evening with a man I find to be very interesting." Koray explained, giving Blake's hand a bit of a squeeze before withdrawing his own.

"It's not just that, Koray. I mean..." the reindeer took a deep breath as he stopped at a red light. "This could go very well or this could go very...very...badly." He sighed. "I have no idea what's in store and I just hope that something will come out of it..."

Koray cocked his head at the reindeer, smiling a little at the concern that he showed; Blake truly seemed to want this to work. That surprised the fox, given the previous hesitation and concern. But...maybe that meant there was hope for them. Maybe this could be more. He reached out to grip Blake's hand again.

"Don't worry about the future, Blake. The present is all that matters. And presently, I'm very happy to be here with you." Koray smiled warmly at the reindeer before nodding at the street ahead. "The light's green, by the way." Snickers.

"Oh, right!" Blake nodded and stepped his hoof on the gas before the cars behind him had the chance to honk at him. The reindeer firmly gripped the steering wheel as he turned and did his work as a driver. "Excuse me, I usually pay attention to the road." he chuckles.

Koray chuckled as well. "It's quite alright. You have a lot on your mind right now. I understand. I'm pretty nervous myself." The fox confessed, his tail twitching a little bit in his own nervousness, but it wasn't nearly as noticeable as Blake's twitching was.

"Then we have something in common." Blake nodded, making a few last turns before arriving on the parking lot of a well-established restaurant. It was a local Italian cuisine not too far from where Koray lived and Blake was very familiar with Italian food, having spent some time in Rome during his EFBL days. It was also one of Koray's favourites when the fox wanted to spoil himself.

"Ah, *Bella Luna*...you'll love this restaurant Blake, I promise you." Koray said with a big smile as he moved to get out of the car, tail wagging a little bit in delight as he thought of his favourite restaurant and sharing a wonderful meal there with somebody else for a change. Usually he ate alone, or got take out, so it'd be nice to share a meal for a change.

Blake nodded and followed. This was Koray's plan after all, but it sounded nice to him when the fox first proposed it to him. The fox led the way inside, approaching the hostess with a smile.

“Good evening. Welcome to *Bella Luna*. Do you have a reservation?”

“Yes. Koray Demir. Should be for two.”

“Ah yes. Right this way Mr Demir.” The hostess leopard smiled and picked up two menus, leading them back into the restaurant and seating them at a booth with a candle burning at its center and warm light coming from wall sconces behind them. It was...rather romantic, really. Koray slipped into the booth with a smile and a soft thanks to the hostess. He didn’t even bother picking up his menu; he always ate the same thing here.

Blake picked up the menu and flicked the page gently, scanning the contents of it. There were many traditional dishes on there and a fine selection of wines. The reindeer was more of a beer drinker, but he kept a nice bottle of wine in his cabinet once in a while to stir things up. Blake cleared his throat. “Would you like some wine, maybe?” he asked, looking to the fox.

“Hm...I wouldn’t mind a glass. Might take the edge off.” Koray said with a bit of a chuckle, running a hand through his hair. “Would you like any meal suggestions? The food here is amazing. Very authentic.”

“That would be good, because I don’t know what they’re famous for.” Blake nodded, scanning the wine list, eyes planted on it, as his ears flickered.

“I love the gnocchi and bolognese personally. But for you...maybe the vegetarian ravioli? Oh, wait! Better yet! The cannelloni with three sauces! It comes to the table looking like the Italian flag. It’s quite a beautiful dish, and very tasty. For being vegetarian.” Koray’s ears were perked right up and he was showing some excitement as he pondered about what Blake might like and tried to suggest the best vegetarian dishes he could think of for the ungulate.

“Cannelloni, hm?” he nodded, putting the list down. “With a nice glass of dolcetto? It’s one of my favourites and I see they have that here.” Blake managed to grin for the first time today, feeling more at ease as he talked to the fox.

“Dolcetto would work well I think...I’d prefer something a little lighter if you don’t mind. Maybe a merlot or pinot noir for me...I confess, I don’t care for bitter wines.” The atmosphere between them was starting to relax a little more.

“Two glasses of Merlot then?” Blake smirks.

“Merlot it is.” When the waitress came around, Koray placed their orders; breaded veal and gnocchi for himself, and vegetarian cannelloni and salad for Blake. As well a glass of merlot each. Smiling, he settled in to wait for their meal, looking across the round table to the reindeer quite happily. “I promise you won’t be disappointed Blake. The food here is amazing.”

"Italian food in general can be amazing." Blake nods. "And there's something special about coming to Rome. It's quite a trip there, really." he says, sipping his water while he waits for the wine and food to arrive.

"Really? I've never been to Rome, but I've always wanted to. It looks so beautiful. And the cultural experience alone would be worth the trip. What took you to Rome? What was it like?" Koray asked rather excitedly, his elbows resting shamelessly on the table and his head propped in his hands almost childishly in his curiosity.

"Well, work, obviously, since I played there for a year. The people there are really friendly and passionate for what they believe in. The food and the views are amazing and you can do a lot there." Blake leans on the table, smirking some more. If there was something he could talk about, it was his career, but he had to be careful not to flood Koray on their first date

"I didn't know you'd played there! It must've been wonderful getting to live in such a beautiful place, even if it was for only a year. Where else did you play? I bet you saw so many beautiful places...I'm a little jealous. My career has never taken me out of the US."

"Well..." Blake clears his throat and thought of a way to make it easy to understand. "I was drafted by London and I spent most of my career there, so I got really accustomed to many British things. Then I went to Rome for a year, then Croatia, and I finished my career back home in Helsinki. Now... I don't really know what my favourite spot is, but London has become like a second home for me. There's a lot to like about it too."

"Wow...you've really been around...I'm...kind of jealous. I would love to see Rome...and London...but it's not something that one usually wants to experience alone either, is it?" Koray said with a slight sigh, leaning back in his seat and running his hand through his hair. It was true; he wanted to travel, but traveling alone to see such beautiful places just seemed...a little sad.

"Of course it's better to travel with someone. I have spent a lot of time with my son, but it's not the same as, you know.. a significant other. You feel the urge to show them around and have a great time in the process, but..." he sighs. "When they care more about themselves and serious things then they're just... not worth staying around." the reindeer lowered his head a little, reminded of the divorce he went through several years ago.

Koray sighed as he watched Blake's mood rapidly drop, shifting over in the booth a little and reaching out for the reindeer's hand once more.

"I'm sorry Blake, I hadn't meant to bring up such painful things for you. But...is it not better to find new happiness rather than dwell on past pain? You have so much to be happy for in your current life, why let her bitterness continue to make you unhappy?" He asked gently, trying to be helpful and hoping that he was going to make the reindeer feel better.

"I won't, don't worry." Blake sighs. "I'll try and have a good summer with Erik. We have things planned after all." the reindeer looks on as the fox holds his hand again and he covers it with his own. "He has a big tournament ahead of himself and I get to watch, which is more than I could ask for." he continued. "So it will do me and him some good."

Koray smiled as he felt that big hand cover his own, looking up to the big reindeer. There was a light in Blake's eyes as he spoke about getting to travel with his son for a passion that both reindeer shared; the fox could tell it meant a lot to him.

"Sounds like fun. I'm sure Erik will do really well. He's so passionate about his sport."

"It's true. I think he got that from me." Blake chuckled. "First it was my career, then he got into it in school. He started very early." the reindeer smiled, remembering the fun he had when he watched Erik grow up. His first basketball, his first hoop, watching him make shots when he only had small hooves. The fondness alone made Blake light up more. And Koray could really see the change in the older male as he spoke about his son. He smiled tenderly.

"You know Blake...the way you light up when you talk about Erik...or basketball...it's...rather inspiring. I'm...really glad I get to see you like this."

"I'm just... passionate about these things." Blake chuckled lightly and shrugged. "It's just a few things that made me who I am today. It's hard to talk about anything else, really."

"Listening to people talk about what they love is always the best thing to listen to. I don't mind." Before their conversation could continue, though, their waiter came over with their meals; the plates were large and the portions filled the plates with ease, making Koray smile. He always left this place in a food coma.

Blake looked down to his meal with a smirk, noticing the Italian flag on it. Then he didn't hesitate to work on it. It looked and smelled delicious. Without hesitation, he took his first bite and he slumped back into his seat, chewing. "Oh god..." is all he managed to say.

Koray snickered at Blake's initial reaction to the food, gathering up his first forkful of gnocchi and bolognese to enjoy with a happy little murr.

"I told you this place was amazing." The fox teased after he'd swallowed, licking his lips. The conversation was a little less now that they were enjoying a meal, but they still chatted a little bit as they savoured the heavenly fare. As their plates started to look empty, Koray took a sip of his wine to wash down his latest mouthful, smiling at the reindeer.

"I hope you don't mind but...I've planned a little something for after dinner as well."

Blake paused as he was about to drink some of his remaining wine. "What is it?" he looked towards Koray with a bit of concern.

"OH! Nothing bad. I mean, I *hope* you'll enjoy it anyway! I bought us a couple of tickets to a play...an operetta to be exact. It's a Gilbert and Sullivan." Koray explained with a bit of a sheepish smile; perhaps the usual would be a movie, but the fox preferred live theatre over films, and he rather hoped that Blake didn't mind that. Theatre was an acquired taste, after all.

The reindeer looked at fox with a clueless look. He blinked and took a drink. "Uhm... so, like... a musical?"

"Well...yes...I suppose...but it's not like a Broadway musical. It's very classic, and quite funny actually. I just thought it might be something fun..."

"Sure, sure." Blake nodded. "Let's do it." Koray visibly brightened, smiling at the reindeer. They finished up their meal and the fox immediately paid for the entire bill without hesitation, waving off the reindeer's offer to pitch in casually. Though he made a point of not letting Blake see the bill as he handed over his credit card.

With dinner out of the way, the pair made their way back out to Blake's car in silence, the reindeer once again holding the door for Koray and getting a small 'thanks' for his chivalrous gesture. The fox directed Blake to the theatre at which they'd be seeing the play; it was opening night and the theatre was loosely packed.

The fox found that the theatre scene here was fairly quiet, but he didn't mind that. He led Blake to prime seats in the house with a great view of the entire stage and close enough to be able to hear everything really well. Not that it would matter. He knew Blake would probably have a hard time following the rapid pace of the Gilbert and Sullivan piece.

Koray settled in quietly and focused on the stage, but Blake couldn't get himself to focus on the starting play. He couldn't help but keep glancing towards the fox in curiosity, but also because he wasn't that much of a theatre person. This night had been nice so far, but he was still bewildered by this entire thing. It was surreal. Trying to wrap his head around this whole thing was nearly giving him a headache.

But he soon shook it off and focused back on the operetta, just as Koray was. During the intermission, they each got themselves a drink and chatted about the play for a bit, the fox answering some of Blake's questions quite happily before they returned to their seats for the remainder.

Shortly after they settled back in, though, Blake was startled by a gentle weight against his shoulder. Glancing over, the reindeer's eyes widened when he saw Koray's head resting

against his shoulder, the fox wearing a smile of utter contentment and delight, hands folded in his lap politely.

He wasn't sure what to do. Did he ignore it? Put his arm around the fox? Feeling too awkward, he chose to ignore it, but found that the contact was...oddly comforting. It'd been a long time since he'd had a moment like this with somebody. He remembered what it was like when Mila was still in love with him. The dates they went on, the weekend trips, it was all coming back to him and it was nice. But now, he has someone else to do these kinds of things with. It's been several years since he spent time with someone other than his son or a client. It felt different doing this with a male, but also similar. The reindeer could sense that he still had to get more comfortable with the idea, but for now, this felt good to him.

The play ended and a standing ovation erupted. Koray jumped up from his seat and clapped fast and with enthusiasm, as he enjoyed the play. Blake on the other hand stood up and clapped slower, but only because he ended up being too distracted from his own thoughts, thus missing a few key points from the plot.

"So? Did you enjoy it?" Koray asked, his tail lightly thumping against the seats as they made their way out to the car.

"Oh, uh..." Blake hesitated for a moment. "It was good. The second half was quite impressive."

Koray quirked an eyebrow and slapped the reindeer on the shoulder gently. Blake just looked on in confusion.

The drive home was relatively quiet as the two discussed the play they had just watched, Koray more so with enthusiasm. Blake tried to keep up and keep the fox happy, but the fox could tell that theatre wasn't part of the reindeer's usual hobbies.

Blake pulled the car over, arriving at Koray's first. The two got out and walked to the front door, where Koray turned around to face the older reindeer.

"So, uhm..." the fox started. "I had a really great time tonight. Thank you."

"Uh, no problem." the reindeer replied. "I had a good time as well. Good food and good play."

"Indeed." Koray nodded, his tail swishing behind him. Impulse kicked in for the fox and Blake watched as Koray gave him a quick kiss on the cheek. The cross fox then pulled back with a light blush, pulling his hands behind his back in slight embarrassment.

"Koray..." Blake said, rubbing his neck in confusion.

“Sorry. I know you want to take this slow, as we discussed. You’re not used to being with someone like me, and I understand. I’ll slow down for you and let you come forward. Sound good?”

“Yeah, uh...” Blake hesitated. “Yes, sure. Look, I’m sorry I’m so slow with this whole adjusting to this. It’s just... I haven’t dated someone in years. And I’ve never...”

“I know Blake. And that’s alright.” Koray stepped forward to take Blake’s big hand in his own smaller one. The reindeer hesitated for a moment, but then let the fox take it. “I will do my best to help you get used to the idea. This is new territory for you and I’m very aware of that. I promise I will not overstep your boundaries and make you uncomfortable. Alright?”

The reindeer rubbed his antler as he looked at the smaller fox, who was filled with joy in the moment. Blake took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes, that sounds good. Anyway, I should go. Erik is probably home by now.” Blake said and slowly let go of Koray, who nodded and let him slip away from the front door.

“Alright, Mr. Toivonen. Have a good night and see you again sometime.” Koray smirked and gently waved to the reindeer as he left.

“See you, Mr. Demir.” Blake tried to play along with Koray, hoping to get a laugh out of the fox, with success.

-

Blake stepped into his home to an empty living room, electronics quietly buzzing in the background. With a deep sigh, the older reindeer pulled off his suit jacket and sat down on the couch, taking a deep breath as he loosened his tie. He had just been on a date with another guy and it felt completely surreal. He’d liked it, even if the play wasn’t something he’d enjoy on a regular basis. But the fox seemed happy around him, relaxed and enthusiastic. Koray’s joy was imprinted on the reindeer’s mind. It made him smile as he thought about it.

Thuds echoed the room as Erik made his way downstairs and looked to his father in a suit. The younger reindeer quirked his eyebrow.

“(What are you dressed up for?)” Erik asked as he stood near the couch.

“(Oh, uh, I went to see a play today.)” Blake said in a calm tone. His son blinked.

“(I didn’t know you were into theatre.)”

“(Someone gave me a free ticket, so I thought I would use it.)” the older reindeer replied.



“(Who?)” the younger reindeer asked. Blake paused for a moment. He had to make up something to hide his involvement with Koray. A snort and Blake spoke again.

“(The library I go to raffled tickets away and I happened to win one.)” the father said reassuringly. Erik just nodded and shrugged and made his way to the fridge to grab a coke.

“(How was your day?)” Blake asked his son.

“(Ok, went to Troy’s again. Band practice was great. Learned a few more songs. We might get a gig soon somewhere.)” the younger reindeer replied, making his way to the stairs.

“(Well, just keep practicing and you’ll be great. Have you started packing for Germany yet?)” Blake asked.

“(Yeah, just a few things though.)”

“(Ok. Well, good night, Erik.)”

“(Night, dad.)” , and thus, Erik made his way back up to his room.

Blake took a deep breath, leaning back against the couch. He had to tell Erik about Koray eventually. But how? It was weird to think that he was dating Erik’s instructor, but it was never his intention to make Erik uncomfortable. That’s the least he wanted to do. Koray lit up whenever Erik was mentioned, like the younger reindeer was family to him, but how does Erik feel about Koray? That’s unknown to his father.

The older reindeer switched on the TV, then closed his eyes after a few minutes, snoring and falling asleep on the couch. This wasn’t the first time he’d done this, and it likely wouldn’t be the last.