

July 26th, 2015

Blake and Erik landed back in Minneapolis late on a Friday night. The two reindeer were exhausted from a combination of jetlag and their whirlwind visit to Europe. They visited family and Erik competed in the EuroBasket U21 tournament. Even as he picked up his car from the airport parking, Blake couldn't help but absently finger his phone.

He wondered if he should text Koray and let him know that he was back in Minnesota.

They'd been messaging back and forth via online instant messengers while he'd been gone and he honestly felt like they'd gotten closer in their time apart. And honestly, Blake was finding a certain thrill in keeping all of this away from Erik, who was asleep beside him. Sure, he felt bad about it, but at the same time, it was like he was a kid again. Blake smiled softly at the thought of the cross fox, affection in his eyes.

Pulling up to home, Blake shook Erik awake and the pair gathered their bags and headed into the house. Erik shuffled to his bedroom with a mumbled, "Good night", Blake returning it before heading to his own room. He sat down on the edge of his bed and toyed with his cell, looking at the last message that Koray had sent him just the day before.

*'Be safe Blake; I miss you. Good night.'*

So simple, but those words meant so much to Blake. Koray missed him. And if he thought about it, he missed Koray.

Sighing, Blake put his phone back in his pocket and checked in on Erik shortly; the teen was fast asleep. With that, the reindeer headed back out to his car, locking the house up behind him before driving off into the Minnesota night.

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March 2nd, 2016

Winter was still doing its rounds in Minnesota, but that did not stop students at Bedrock University from feeling a warm buzz. It was game night, and Bedrock's basketball squad was facing Prairie Valley for the Midwest Conference final. If the team won this game, they would enter the 2016 FCAA tournament for the first time in 10 years. The gym was filled to the brim, as thousands of students and parents gathered, waving ice blue and dark grey scarves and flags to support their school in such an important game.

Erik sat in the locker room, warmed up and ready to go, looking down towards his sneakers. He knew a pair of FBA scouts were in the crowd tonight, but he was not to be rattled by the fact.

The team knew that Erik had great potential to turn pro, but they needed to win in order to not just help Erik, but the school to become a force in college sports once more.

A short, broad groundhog made his way into the locker room, holding a clipboard. His ice blue shirt showed off his beer gut all too well. It was Dalton McDougald, the head coach and he needed to address the team before the big game.

“Alright, listen up!” the groundhog belted out, his players paying him attention as they should. “This is it. Our ticket to the big event. You guys have been playing your tails off all season. And I mean everyone,” he smirked. “But I want one more win.”

The tension in the room began to rise, but it felt like a routine to Erik. His national team coach in Finland was even more intense than Dalton, but it helped his team win a bronze medal at a European tournament. Since Finland was not a basketball nation, it was a great accomplishment. This big game in America was a welcoming challenge for the young reindeer.

“At 1, Roxy. At 2, Zack, At 3, Olivia, At 4, Emmanuel, and at motherfudging 5, Erik!” Dalton read the starting line-up, riling up the team as the noise levels increased. “Let’s go!” the groundhog shouted, making the team stand up and put their warm-up gear on, each of them leaving the locker room one by one, walking into the tunnel. The players jumped a little, shook their arms and legs and loosened up until they were called out onto the court, to vivid cheers of the crowd that hoped to see a curse being broken.

As the teams gathered at the bench, Erik saw the bench players line up to greet the starters with high fives. One by one, the starters got their limelight as the announcer did his work on the microphone, greeted by the cheers of many. The first four players were announced, until the name on everyone’s mind finally appeared.

“And finally, the fur in the middle...7 foot 4 sophomore out of Oulu, Finland, please welcome number 81, Erik...Toivonen!!” The tall, grey reindeer walked up to his teammates and high fived each and every one of them, with a determined smirk on his snout, knowing they had his back tonight.

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Koray sat at his office desk, staring at his laptop computer blankly. It was nearly 8:30 PM on a Thursday night and marking papers became increasingly difficult to do so. He leaned onto his elbows, rubbing his temples, sighing by himself.

The school year has been about the same for him, with students dropping out early in the year, and the one staying helped him at least feel better about himself as a teacher. One in particular kept standing out.

Erik Toivonen was not an exceptional student in regards to his grades, but his effort and will to learn was enough for Koray to develop an emotional bond with his boyfriend's son, even if he was unaware that his own literature professor was seeing his father behind his back. That concept bothered him, yet he wanted Erik to focus on school rather than finding out about his father's new relationship. But it was getting to a point where Koray just wanted to tell Erik about his feelings for the kid. He wanted to be part of Erik's life. He saw Blake's reflection in Erik every day, and it became increasingly harder not to think about a future together with the Toivonens. It was a motherly instinct for Koray, but he couldn't help it after many months of seeing him in school, yet not being about to approach him as more than just his teacher.

Lindsay, a lynx tutor, walked into Koray's office. Her dress shirt and shirt were showing slight wear from the day, as she stopped to check up on her foxy colleague.

"Still working on those?" she asked.

The cross fox adjusted his glasses and nodded. "Unfortunately. But I really can't focus right now. I should just stop for the day," Koray explained.

"Something on your mind?" Lindsay sat down at the desk, putting her bag down.

Koray sighed for a moment before finally nodding slightly. "You know about me and Blake Toivonen, right?"

The lynx nodded. "Of course, you told me months ago. Did something happen between you two?"

"No, not like that," Koray tried to reassure. "But we have been living separately since we started. He really wants his son to focus on classes, rather than be distracted by our relationship. But it's gotten to a point where I just can't take it anymore. I am tired of living a lie for one of my favourite students." The cross fox took off his glasses and rubbed behind his ear. "I want to be something more for Erik than just a teacher."

Lindsay perked her ears up. "Why that's wonderful, Koray. You have to tell him that!"

"Not until I can convince my boyfriend to talk to him about it," the cross fox leaned on his hands over the table. "That's his job, and he knows it."

The lynx leaned back on her chair. "You think he will though? It seems like he's scared to lose Erik."

"But that's the thing, they moved here together, they practice together. For crying out loud, he's Erik's father," Koray exclaimed, rather loudly, as his frustration was mounting. "I need to push

Blake to tell him. I can't wait much longer." Koray took a deep breath as he put his glasses back on. "I know Erik likes me as a teacher, but we'll see what he thinks of me in a different role."

"I'm sure Erik will warm up to you." Lindsay stood up. "He is a great guy, and he does try his best, even if he doesn't understand at first." She adjusted the bag on her shoulder. "Give him time to think about this once he does find out."

"You're right." The cross fox nodded, leaning back on his chair, breathing through his moist nose. "I need patience just as much as the other two."

"Exactly." The lynx smiled, prompting Koray to smile right back. "Oh, you might want to head down to the arena?" She made her way towards the exit before Koray stopped her.

"What for?"

"You do know Bedrock might go to the FCAA tournament this year, right?" Lindsay grinned. "Come on! The game is almost over!" and the lynx darted off down the hallway. Koray gulped. Erik was probably playing right now, and if he wanted to be part of his life, he needed the support. The cross fox packed his things hastily into his leather briefcase, turned off the lights and locked his door before following his colleague.

"Wait up!"

Koray was not an athlete by far. He jogged as fast as he could, watching as Lindsay's heels clopped on the hard surface of the university hallways, the sound of a roaring crowd getting louder and louder. Something was going down. Koray's phone rang, as he received a message. It was Blake, telling him to come down, but the cross fox was a step ahead of him. He followed Lindsay into the arena, the roar ringing in his pointy ears. He stood beside her as his heart began to race, trying to make sense of what was happening.

The scoreboard was ticking the seconds away. 20 seconds left. 55-54 was the score for the home team. Koray scanned the court and immediately found the long hair, the antlers and the big number 81 on the back of Erik's jersey. The cross fox watched with perked ears.

The wolf point guard of Prairie Valley dribbled the ball upcourt, scanning for a potential play. Bedrock was tightly defending against their opponents. The wolf passed the ball to different teammates, but it was no use. The clock raced against him. 5 seconds left. He then sprinted through into the paint, seeing an opening, then handing the ball off to his elk teammate, who went for the lay-up. Koray tensed up.

Then, as the elk rolled the ball off his hand towards the net, a grey hand reached up and swatted the ball away, and into Yvonne's hands. The mule deer wrapped her arms around the ball before anyone could get to it. The final buzzer rang.

Bedrock's fans were ecstatic. The team jumped off the bench to the cheers of the sold out crowd, and stormed the arch as all fifteen players embraced each other, fist-pumping and cheering. Bedrock University has just punched their ticket to the FCAA tournament. Finally, the state of Minnesota would have a representative in the biggest college tournament of the country again.

The cross fox standing on the stairs of the arena could not believe what he just saw. Lindsay belted out in excitement as she wrapped her arms around her colleague, jumping with glee.

"They did it! They did it!" she cheered.

"Yes! They won, right? They won?" Koray was confused as he held onto his glasses, unable to comprehend what was going on. But he saw Erik, the tall reindeer, in the middle of it all, as he hugged and high-fived his teammates. A bright smile was on the young buck's face, making the fox smile himself. He was just happy to see Erik smile so brightly, like he'd never seen him smile before.

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March 5th, 2016

Koray sighed, sliding his fingers up the ridge of his muzzle and rubbing at the bridge of his nose, glasses raising as he tried to focus back on his book. It was late, he was tired, but he was at a point in his book where he didn't want to stop reading. Besides, a good harlequin romance before bed always helped him sleep.

And he'd been having a hard time sleeping without Blake around. It's crazy to imagine that after many months, they still hadn't actually spent a night together yet. They'd made habits of sending 'Good night' and 'Good morning' texts to each other, something they couldn't do when they were a world apart. They would chat online whenever they both got a chance, but the timezones made it difficult.

So tonight, Koray would just read his book and go to bed.

Before he could get back to his reading, he heard a gentle knock on his front door. Frowning, his ears flickered, and he decided to ignore it; anybody calling on him at this time of night was not somebody he felt like dealing with, he was sure. He focused back on his book again, but just as he started reading once more, the knock came again, louder this time, and accompanied by a voice calling out to him in a hushed tone.

"Koray? Koray, are you awake?"

The fox's ears perked straight up; he recognized that voice, and he hadn't thought he'd hear it anytime soon. Blake wasn't due home yet was he? It didn't seem like the date was right, but that had definitely been the reindeer's deep rumbling voice. Koray put his bookmark in place and closed his book, setting it aside before scurrying to the door, not even caring that he only wore his pyjama pants.

Looking through the peephole briefly, his fluffy tail wagged happily behind him as he unlocked the door and pulled it open.

"Blake?" he murmured, his golden eyes shining brightly. But before the reindeer could open his mouth in greeting, he had a pair of arms wrapped around his neck and a set of lips pressed firmly against his own. Shocked, his eyes widened, his hands held off to his sides, not entirely sure what to do with this little surprise.

But as quickly as it had started, it was over, and Koray was standing back looking terribly embarrassed by what he'd just done. His bushy tail hung low, his ears laid back, and he looked quite sorry for overstepping those boundaries they'd set. The fox had promised to go at Blake's pace, follow his lead, and here he'd just jumped right over those lines they'd drawn.

"Blake...I...I'm sorry," Koray stammered, trying to keep his composure. "I...I just...I know you're not ready..."

Blake had been surprised by the kiss, but looking at Koray as the poor fox rambled he found himself smiling affectionately. When was the last time he'd been welcomed home so enthusiastically? With such love and affection? He hadn't realized just how much he'd missed that. He barely thought of it, stepping forward into Koray's home and leaning down to press a kiss against the fox's lips, silencing his rambling quite effectively.

Pulling back, the reindeer smiled down at the stunned fox, nuzzling their noses together. "I missed you, too, Koray," he murmured in that thickly accented voice of his, Koray's tail starting to wag softly behind him as he smiled up at Blake, moving into those warm arms and returning an even warmer kiss.

As they parted this time, he smiled, closing his front door and locking it before properly inviting Blake in for a little nightcap and some conversation.

The two sat down on the couch, two cups of tea on the table in front of them, as Koray adjusted his glasses and began to talk.

"Blake, I need to talk to you about Erik." Koray's smile had already faded, as he began to be serious. Blake dropped his ears.

"It's been 9 months now since we started going out together, and I'm tired of living a lie for Erik." the cross fox took a deep breath as the nervous energy was making him crawl inside his own fur. "I want him to know about this."

Blake wanted to refuse the idea, but he dropped his finger rather quickly. He knew this would come sooner or later.

"No, you're right," Blake sighed as he hunched over. "I've been meaning to do this sooner or later myself, but you know I didn't want him to lose focus on school. I will not make a big deal out of this."

"I think it's too late for that." Koray crossed his arms. "We've had months now to figure this out, but you keep putting it off because of his education. I know you want Erik to focus, but we cannot do this behind his back either. We're not children, Blake. It's not fair to all of us. We have to tell him."

"But how?" Blake rubbed his hair. "I cannot suddenly drop this on him like a bomb. That's crazy. 'Oh hey, Erik, listen, I'm going out with a man now.' No, I can't do that." The reindeer was making a mockery of himself without even realizing that the fox beside him was unamused. Koray could only rub his temples as he leaned back. Blake stopped talking as he watched Koray. "I'm...I'm sorry. I just have no idea how to say this to him."

"I know." Koray sighed. "I know. But if you want me to be part of something bigger with your family, then you have to let me in and be that someone. I love Erik like a son, too, and you know that."

Blake simply nodded and slouched back into the couch, rubbing his head, his mind clouded with thoughts on how he was supposed to get over this issue. The fox beside him moved over close to his side and placed a hand on the reindeer's knee.

"Look, I know you only want the best for him, and I completely understand. But you need to do this, for all of us," Koray said before putting his head on Blake's chest. "He is not 12 years old, Blake."

The reindeer found it hard to give a reply immediately. He looked around the decorated living room, trying to find words. The fox on his chest gave Blake a gentle rub on his stomach.

"I want to take care of him, too, Blake," Koray said as he relaxed, being near his boyfriend for once.

"We'll get it taken care of one way or another," Blake huffed, leaning back in his seat, not stopping Koray's antics.

Eventually Blake was stretched out on the length of Koray's couch, dozing, and the fox soon chose to join him in a peaceful sleep.

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Upon awakening, Blake found the gentle weight of the fox resting on top of him where he lay sprawled over a couch, his large body unable to fully fit on the piece of furniture. He stretched carefully, trying his best not to wake the sleeping fox, but when he absently checked the time on his watch he was forced to do a double take.

("Shit!") Blake exclaimed in his native language; he'd meant to be home early that morning so that Erik would be none the wiser of his slipping away, but the reindeer had overslept. Shifting, he gently shook Koray awake, soon meeting bleary golden eyes.

"Huh...? Wha...? Blake...?" He murmured cluelessly, sleepily.

"I overslept, Koray. I need to get home. Erik's going to catch me," Blake said urgently, concern on his features. But as Blake scrambled to get these things to head out, his phone on the coffee table went off. It was Erik.

"Oh," Koray replied, seeing Erik's face on Blake's phone. The older reindeer sighed and picked up the phone. "(Hello.)"

"(Where the hell are you, dad?)" the younger reindeer on the phone was irritated. Erik knew his dad should be home in the morning, but this time, it was different. There was a sense of curiosity in his voice as well.

"(I'm... I'm with someone right now. Sorry, I meant to tell you,)" Blake tried to cover up, but it was feeling like a desperate attempt to cover up.

"(What? A client? A new friend? You don't usually do such a thing around me.)" Erik was beginning to grow impatient.

"I..." Blake paused as Koray moved over to his side, giving him a reassuring look. It had to be now. "(I'll be home soon. I need to tell you something.)"

"Ok?" Erik replied.

"(I'll talk to you at home,)" Blake said before hanging up. The load on his shoulders was piling up on him, and he was feeling it. He rubbed his forehead, trying to calm down. It was then that Koray rubbed his back and shoulders, trying to comfort his hooved boyfriend.

"Do what you must, Blake." Koray nodded. "But let me go with you."

Blake nodded. He would need the support.

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Koray watched from the passenger seat of Blake's vehicle as the reindeer walked to the back door to open it. He rubbed his cheek nervously. He knew that this moment had to come, but it was hard to go through. Leaning forward to look into his bag, he pulls out another book and opens to the page where he left it. A distraction from this was welcome at this point.

Blake opened the door and walked in, a look of shame on his face, trying to keep his composure. Erik was on the couch, on his phone as he sees his father approach and sit down opposite to him.

"Erik," Blake started, looking at his son, who said nothing. "(I should have told you this a long time ago.)"

"(Just tell me what it is, dad.)" Erik was beginning to feel really grumpy, as he crossed his arms.

Blake rubbed his head and took a deep breath before he finally spoke honestly. "(I've met someone, and we have been dating for some time now. I wasn't sure how you would react to it, because it hasn't been long since me and your mother broke up. But I want you to know that... well... he loves you as much as I do and wants you to have that step into adulthood.)" Blake waited for a moment for Erik's reaction.

"(Wait, what? He?)" Erik began to grow confusion as he couldn't comprehend the idea of his father dating a male at his age.

"(Yes, a he.)" Blake swallowed. "(But not just, well, anyone,)" the older reindeer took another deep breath. "(It's Koray.)"

"(You're dating my TEACHER!??)" Erik's voice erupted, out of shock more than embarrassment. The younger reindeer stood up and walked to the kitchen. "(How could you, dad!? Is this so I can pass that literature class!?)" he raised suspicion, but Blake was quick to cut him off.

"(Absolutely not! I would never do such a thing!)" Blake snorted, unimpressed. "(This had nothing to do with your grades! You're a smart young man! You don't need me to scoop low like that!)" Now Blake was the angry one, staring at his son.

Erik only managed to calm down and simply say, "Sorry," before stopping once more to collect his thoughts.

Blake stood straight. “(Like I said, we never mentioned your grades. That is all on you, Mister,)” he snorted again.

The younger reindeer leaned back against the counter, nodding. A few minutes passed, as silence rang through the house. Then Erik spoke again.

“(So why a guy?)” Erik looked up to him. “(I have nothing against homosexuals, but how long has this been going on?)” he tried to remain composed, as he brushed his long hair aside. “(Is that why you divorced mom?)”

Blake’s heart sank. “(No, not that. Look, it was a spur of the moment, ok?)” The older reindeer looked to his son helplessly. “(He asked me out after we had dinner once, and I was just so unsure. I hadn’t dated someone in years, and I had no idea if I should have said yes or no. I just needed to find an answer for myself, if I wanted to take the chance and see if I like it, and I wanted to hold off on this, because I didn’t want you to lose focus on school. You didn’t need a distraction like that. I’m sorry I lied to you. I’m deeply sorry.” the older reindeer paused as he tried to come up with a good explanation. Erik’s expression slowly began to turn sour.

“(All I wanted was to give Koray a chance and not get you involved in this. I didn’t want you to suffer in school, but I was selfish, ok? I was selfish trying to cover up so I didn’t distract you, and you didn’t have to worry about me. I’m so sorry.)” The reindeer’s eyes began to water as the weight of his action began to load up on his back. He told the truth to his son with a heavy heart, his big hand shaking a little.

Erik sighed, rubbing his hair. He turned away. “(I don’t know what to say,)” he explains as he moved to grab his backpack. “(You’ve been lying to me for months now, and you’re probably gay too. I just... I can’t do this,)” he says as he wrapped the backpack around him and walked out the front door, shutting it, without another word.

Blake held onto the kitchen counter, his eyes watery, as he slipped down, eventually sitting on the cold, tiled floor beneath, sobbing away as his internal troubles got to him greatly. Putting his head into his hands, the shame and embarrassment was at a boiling point, as the tears rolled down his grey cheeks.

The back door opened, and Koray stepped in to the Toivonen townhouse for the first time. His ears perked as he heard the sobs of a familiar voice. He dashed to the kitchen to see a heartbroken reindeer, leaning against the counter. With a wince, he got to his knees and wrapped his arms around the distraught Blake.

“You’re all right, Blake.” Koray tried to speak tenderly to his boyfriend.

“I’m such an awful father,” Blake sobbed.

“No,no you’re not.” Koray rubbed Blake’s hair, trying to calm him down. “You had good intentions, but they were not the best. Just, please, Blake, I’m sorry too. I’m sorry it got to this.” The cross fox put his glasses aside and pressed his snout against the reindeer’s cheek fur, wincing alongside his reindeer mate. The two tried to calm each other, but the lies and wrongdoings of Blake were just heavy on both of them. It would take a good 15 minutes until the two could recollect their thoughts and feel the closeness of their relationship.

Blake was hurt, but the worst part was over.