

Chapter 14 - Between friends

11:03 PM, Minneapolis, Minnesota. It's been 3 days since Blake Toivonen and Koray Demir met for dinner at a Scandinavian establishment. While the meal itself was nice and filling, it was the aftermath that startled the middle-aged reindeer. In a sheer effort of courage, the cross fox asked the reindeer for a date with him. But Blake didn't date guys. He had been married to a female for years and the idea of dating a male was... he had no answer for it.

Blake grabbed his phone and sent a tweet out to Wilmer Grehr, a good friend of his from his college playing days. The two had stayed in touch occasionally throughout their lives. As soon as Blake realized that Wilmer was in a same-sex relationship himself, he thought it was best to ask him.

The wait seemed long, but a few minutes later, Blake's phone buzzed and he promptly got a reply. He got the go-ahead to call his red deer friend in Hawaii. Not hesitating any longer, Blake picked up the phone and dialed his number.

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6:15 PM, Honolulu, Hawaii. Wilmer had been a little surprised to get a random Tweet from Blake that evening, having spent his days relaxing and recovering from a tumultuous basketball season full of struggle and stress that led the stag to illness. He and Ariel had decided to relax on their patio with a glass of wine each and enjoy the warm Hawaiian evening.

That didn't mean Wilmer didn't welcome a call from Blake, and so, he waited patiently after sending his Tweeter response for his phone to ring. Soon enough, it did. He plucked it up and deftly pressed 'talk' on the handset, pressing it to his ear.

"And to what do I owe the pleasure of your conversation, Blake?" He greeted, grinning as he swirled his wine, feeling utterly calm and relaxed.

Blake huffed a little on the other side of the line, leaning back against his couch. "Well, uhm, it's rather very complicated and I just thought that this would be something you could answer for me." The reindeer replied, holding the wireless phone firmly, trying to relax himself.

Wilmer shifted in his seat, putting his glass of wine aside as he moved to sit up, swinging his feet off the side of the lounge and sitting up properly. His friend sounded terribly concerned. And maybe a little nervous? But what could Wilmer possibly help the reindeer with? Ariel quirked an eyebrow curiously, but Wilmer waved him off.

"Well, what seems to be the problem, Blake? I'll do what I can."

"Please don't laugh, ok? Because I've never had this happen to me before in my life." Blake took a deep breath, then finally spoke. "I got asked to be someone's date. And well, it's not from a female."

"I will try my best not to laugh, but usually when one has to say that, Blake, you know as well as I do that it usually ends up being laughable." Wilmer warned gently before allowing Blake to continue. He cocked his head a little, offering a small, apologetic smile to his husband for disrupting their quiet evening. He was pulled abruptly back to the conversation at hand by what he was told.

He remained silent for a moment. He couldn't help but chuckle, shifting to lay back on the lounge again in comfort.

"And that's a problem...why?" Wilmer said with amusement in his voice.

"Because... I'm not into the male gender like that. At least I'm positive I'm not. I mean, you know I have a son. I was married for 14 years!" Blake huffed, trying to explain his case, but the more he thought about it, the more his argument seemed unnecessary.

"I'm well-aware of all that, Blake. You're thinking about this in all the wrong ways. Ignoring the factor of gender, tell me about this person. If he feels strongly enough to ask you out, take a moment to think about how *you* feel about *him*."

"Well, he is one of Erik's professors at Bedrock University." Blake started speaking. "He's very much into literature, always dresses nicely and supports Erik in every fashion. I know he even asks about his basketball games sometimes. I just...I like how open-minded he is. How his words flow and how he's so...charismatic, you know?"

Wilmer sat quietly and listened to what Blake told him about this bold man that dared to ask out a straight man like the reindeer. He was rather impressed just by that fact alone, but as he listened more and more, he couldn't help but grin a little.

"You know I was straight before I met Ariel, right?" Wilmer started, smiling to himself as he reached over and gripped his husband's hand affectionately.

"... You're kidding me, right, Wilmer?" Blake huffed.

"I'm not. When I first laid eyes on him, I was 16. We became friends. And one day, unexpectedly, we kissed. You know what I did?" There was a moment of silence before Blake sighed a little.

"What'd you do, Wilmer?"

"I ran, Blake. I was terrified by what had happened, and I ran. I kissed another boy. All I could think was it was wrong. I couldn't spend time with him anymore. I couldn't let myself become 'one of *them*'. It was painful... for both of us." Wilmer finished with a sigh, cocking his head a little as Ariel moved to share the lounge with him. The stag wrapped an arm around the okapi and holding him close as he smiled happily.

"I see." Blake nodded, having grabbed a stiff drink for himself as he was adjusting his seat in the living room. "And now, look at you. You're managing an up-and-coming franchise, building a name for yourself in a paradise, and you have a lifestyle that hardly has any complaints."

"Yes, all of that is true, but the most important part of all is that I have a loving husband and two amazing kids. I wouldn't have *any* of that if I hadn't come to realize that running away was wrong. Sometimes, Blake..." Wilmer paused for a moment.

"Happiness can come from the most unexpected place. It's a lesson I've learned all-too well. So you were asked out by a man, who cares? When was the last time you even went on a date you old workaholic?"

"Well..." Blake raised a finger as he thought of the last time he went on a date. All this travelling and dealing with clients the past few years and especially the past season had left him with little personal time. He had always thought about others. His clients, his partners, and of course, his son. The thoughts processed in his mind and he realized how right Wilmer sounded. The reindeer was well into his 40s and had been working way too hard to be where he is right now. He had forgotten to take personal time.

The idea of dating Koray seemed more realistic the more he thought about it. The cross fox was smart, caring, very civilized and his tastes matched some of Blake's. He had a connection with Koray, but he was in denial and the scare of this backfiring quickly was hammered into his mind. What did he have to lose, really? He hadn't seen someone in a very long time.

"I... I can't remember, honestly." Blake huffed. "I've done so much work these past few years, I never even took care of myself..."

"Exactly, and you're not getting any younger, Blake. Face it. Soon, Erik will go off to live his own life, and where will that leave you? Hm?"

"Voi luojja, Wilmer. We're nearly the same age, and you make me sound like I still have to grow up..." Blake sighed, rubbing the bridge of his snout. "But you're absolutely right. I need to give Koray a chance. Heck, I need to give MYSELF a chance."

“Yes, you do. Maybe it won’t work out, maybe it will. Audaces fortuna iuvat! My biggest advice is be honest with him right from the start if there’s anything specific you’re concerned about. Other than that, go for it. Call him.”

“I hope he’s still up, but I will give it a try. Thanks, Wilmer. I missed talking to you like this.” Blake slouched into the couch, much more relaxed now.

“Glad I could help. Message me later and let me know how it goes.”

“Will do. Enjoy the rest of your evening and sorry to interrupt.”

“Not a problem. Good luck Blake and good night from both Ariel and I.”

“Good night you two.” Blake then lowered his phone and hung up. A deep sigh escaped him. It was now or never. He had his answer.

He pulled up his contacts list, finger hovering over Koray’s name for a moment, before he hit ‘call’.

Blake hoped Koray was still awake. The phone rang in his ear as he waited, until a muffled ‘Hello’ greeted him on the other line. Sure enough, it was Koray.

“Hey Koray, it’s Blake. Sorry if I woke you but uhm, listen, I just really need to talk to you...”