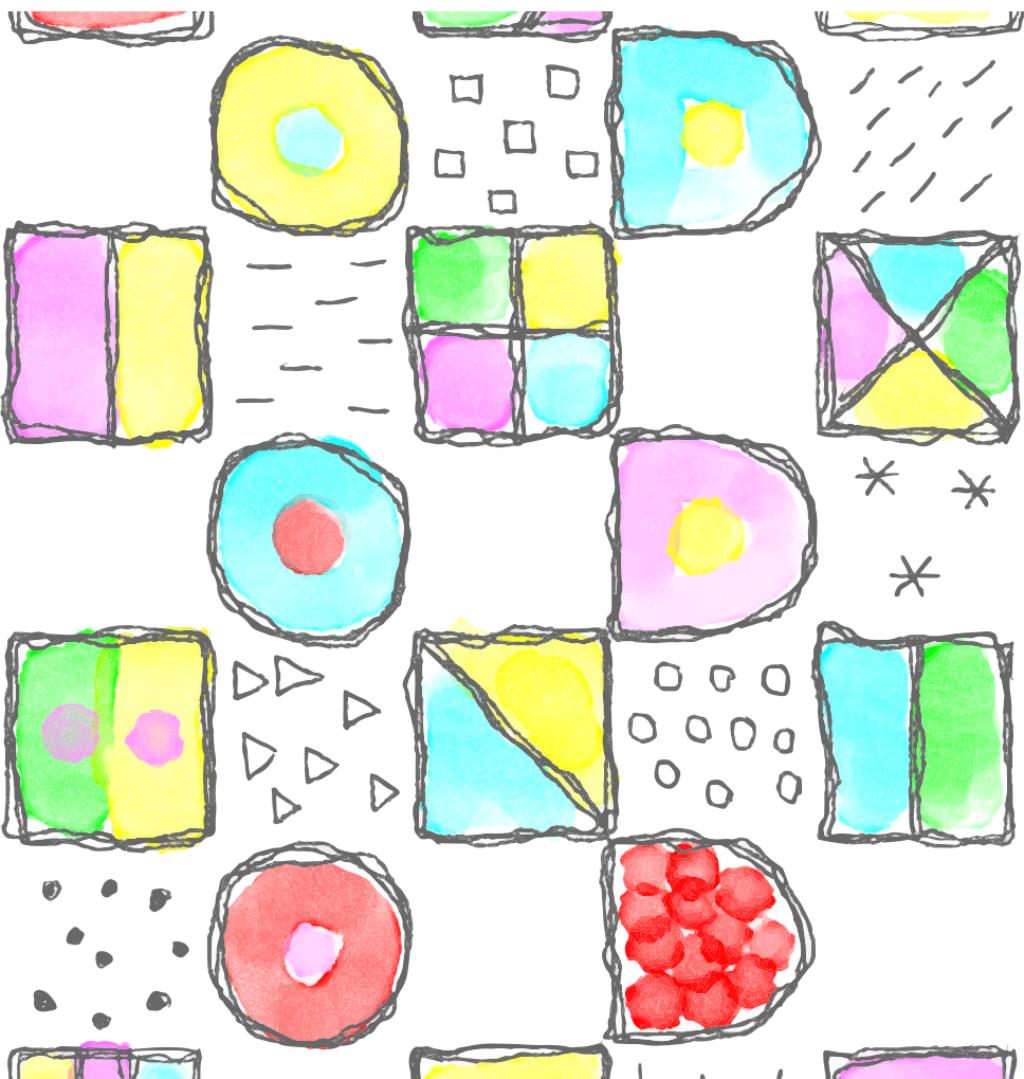


# Starlights: On Campus

Fletcher the Husky









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Cover Art by  
Nigel Hoare



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## Prologue



The auditorium was alive with a low hum—the rustling of crisp new programs, the shuffle of shoes against polished floors, the occasional nervous laugh from freshmen seeing hundreds of faces just as new and unsure as theirs. Bright banners of Northbridge University hung proudly on either side of the stage, the gold lettering catching the sunlight filtering through tall arched windows.

Rows of students sat in neat order, waiting for the ceremony to begin. At the center of one row, Fletcher and Chester sat shoulder-to-shoulder.

Chester leaned back slightly in his chair, green eyes scanning the massive hall with an easy, confident grin. The way he sat—relaxed, open—it was clear he didn't feel weighed down by the occasion. His paw rested casually close to Fletcher's, though not quite touching, as if inviting contact without forcing it.

“Heh, big day, huh? Hard to believe we finally made it here... same campus, same dorm, same everything. Just like we always said we would,” said Chester. His tone was gentle, almost teasing, but under it was a warmth. His gaze lingered on Fletcher, as though trying to read his thoughts amidst the overwhelming buzz of the crowd.

“Yeah... I can’t believe it either. Even the same dorm... I didn’t think we’d get the same dorm,” Fletcher said, his blue eyes wide as they scanned the hall.

The words almost vanished into the sea of voices around them, but Chester heard them clearly.

Chester turned his head, his grin widening. The green in his eyes sparkled under the auditorium lights as he leaned closer, lowering his voice so it was just for Fletcher.

“Guess luck’s on our side, huh? Or maybe fate. I mean, what are the odds?”

He let that hang for a beat, then gently bumped his shoulder against Fletcher’s—a subtle show of reassurance in the crowded hall. His paw shifted slightly, the back of it brushing Fletcher’s paw in what could easily be mistaken as accidental contact by anyone else watching. But the intent was clear.

“Feels like this place is already starting to become home... because you’re here.”

Chester’s expression lingered on Fletcher—warm, affectionate—as the university’s dean stepped up to the podium, tapping the mic. The ceremony was about to begin, but for a moment, Chester seemed more interested in Fletcher’s reaction than in the speech.

“Look! They’re about to begin!” Fletcher said excitedly. His ears perked slightly.

Chester paused, glancing from Fletcher to the stage. His grin softened into something fonder, almost amused at how Fletcher’s attention shifted so quickly.

“You’re too cute when you get excited, you know that?” said Chester. Before Fletcher could respond, the dean’s voice boomed through the hall.

“Welcome, students, to Northbridge University. Today marks the beginning of a new chapter in your lives...”

Applause rippled across the auditorium. Sunlight slanted through tall windows, catching motes of dust in the air, as if the room itself was glowing with possibility. Chester finally leaned back in his seat, but his paw remained dangerously close to Fletcher’s—a silent reassurance amidst the formal words from the stage.



Room 304



On a mid-March afternoon, sunlight spilled through the tall window of Room 304, painting the walls in warm streaks of amber. The dorm was slowly starting to feel lived-in: a couple of open textbooks on the desk, a half-finished cup of coffee on the nightstand, and the faint smell of laundry detergent still clinging to the sheets.

Chester was sprawled comfortably across his bed, one leg bent, flipping absentmindedly through his economics notes. His green eyes lifted the moment the door clicked open.

Fletcher stepped in, the strap of his backpack sliding from his shoulder as he exhaled deeply. His fur looked just a little ruffled from the long day, his ears tilted back in quiet exhaustion.

“Whoa, you look like someone just ran you through three finals back-to-back.”

He swung his legs off the bed, watching Fletcher with that mix of

concern and warmth. His tone was playful, but the way his ears flicked forward showed he was already attentive, already ready to ease Fletcher's day.

"Come here, sit. Tell me what's got you so wiped out."

He patted the edge of his bed invitingly, the spring squeaking just slightly under his palm. Fletcher dropped his backpack with a *thud* and sat down beside Chester, shoulders slumping as he exhaled a weary sigh.

"It's Professor Wilford. He gave us another assignment. A twenty-page essay! And it's due next Friday! I swear he believes we only take his class!"

The frustration in Fletcher's tone lingered in the air.

"Twenty pages? Next Friday? He's outta his mind..." said Chester. He studied Fletcher's expression, the corners of his mouth tugging into a sympathetic grin. Shaking his head, he nudged Fletcher's shoulder gently with his own.

"Guess psychology's all about testing your patience before it tests your brain, huh?"

Chester let the teasing hang for a second, then softened, voice quieter, more sincere.

"Hey. You'll handle it. You always do. And if you need someone to keep you sane while you're buried in books, you've got me. Deal?"

His paw shifted slightly closer, resting on the mattress just by Fletcher's thigh, as if offering silent reassurance.

"Thanks, Chester."

Fletcher offered a small but genuine smile, the corners of his

muzzle lifting as he murmured. Chester's green eyes met Fletcher's blue, holding each other for a fleeting moment.

“Well then. I guess, no time to waste, right?”

Fletcher pushed himself up from the bed, crossing the small space to his desk. The wood creaked faintly as he pulled out a chair and dropped into it, already rummaging through the scattered pile of books and notes.

“Now, where did I put that book, ‘Child Development: Stages and Ages...’”

Fletcher leaned forward, shifting stacks of psychology texts, loose papers, and a coffee-stained syllabus, brows furrowed in mild frustration. Chester watched from his bed, a smirk tugging at his lips as he propped his chin on one paw.

“You mean the book that's been haunting our floor since the day you unpacked? Try under the bed, genius. You tossed half your library down there on move-in day.”

Chester chuckled. After a moment, he rose and walked over, crouching by Fletcher's desk to peer under the bed. His green eyes glinted with mischief.

“Oh!”

Fletcher perked up, ears flicking as he immediately crouched down by the bed. His tail swished once as he started digging through the small dark space—brushing aside a stray sock, the corner of a notebook, and a crumpled receipt from the campus café.

“It's gotta be here somewhere...”

Dust motes swirled in the late light as he pushed further under, his

voice muffled a little.

Chester crouched beside him, resting one elbow on his knee, amusement tugging at his muzzle.

“Careful, you might find a whole civilization under there. Maybe even last week’s missing pen.”

He watched with open fondness, his green eyes following Fletcher’s every move, not really caring about the book—just the sight of his boyfriend determinedly rooting around like a pup.

A moment later, Fletcher’s blue eyes lit up as he pulled a thick, dust-speckled volume from under the bed.

“Found it!”

Fletcher straightened up, tail flicking with satisfaction as he held the book aloft. Chester laughed, shaking his head. He leaned back on his heels, then rose to stand over Fletcher, ruffling the husky’s headfur with a broad paw.

“There’s the victory pose. Knew you’d track it down. Kinda makes me wonder if I should hide your books more often—just to see that look on your face.”

Chester grinned down at Fletcher, clearly more delighted with Fletcher’s expression than the book itself. He nudged Fletcher gently toward his desk chair, then flopped back onto his own bed, propping himself up on an elbow, still watching.

Fletcher slid into his chair, setting the thick textbook onto the desk with a soft *thud*. He flipped open the lid of his laptop, the screen lighting up his face in the golden wash of sunset filtering through the dorm window. His tail swayed once nervously before stilling.

“Okay, here goes nothing! Wish me luck, Chester!” said Fletcher, almost like a pep talk to himself, but loud enough for Chester. Chester sat up a little straighter on his bed, a grin tugging at his muzzle as he propped his chin on his paw. His green eyes softened as he watched Fletcher’s determined expression.

“Luck? You don’t need luck, Fletch. You’ve got brains, heart, and way too much coffee.”

He paused, then chuckled.

“But just in case... good luck, babe.”

He made a little exaggerated motion, blowing an invisible kiss across the room before flopping back with his arms behind his head, clearly enjoying teasing while also quietly proud.

Fletcher’s ears turned pink against his gray-and-white fur as he shyly lifted his paw, catching the invisible kiss out of the air. His tail flicked once behind him before settling as he lowered his gaze back toward the glowing laptop screen.

“Thanks, Chester.”

Chester froze mid-flop, his grin widening into something even warmer, pride and affection glowing in his green eyes. He propped himself up on one elbow again, gaze locked on Fletcher as though the rest of the world didn’t exist.

“Anytime, Fletch. Anytime.”

The room settled into a comfortable quiet—the faint hum of Fletcher’s laptop, the scratching of a pencil as Chester idly doodled in his notebook, and the muted buzz of voices carrying through the dorm hallway. The golden light outside faded toward dusk, turning

the walls amber and soft.

For now, it felt like the world had slowed down, leaving just the two of them tucked away in Room 304.

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The dorm room had grown quiet. Outside, muffled voices drifted faintly through the hallway, but inside, only the soft hum of Fletcher's laptop filled the air. Fletcher was slumped over his desk, muzzle resting against his folded arms. His chest rose and fell in slow, even breaths, his ears flicking slightly as he dozed. A stray lock of fur fell across his face, catching the laptop's light.

Chester glanced up from his own bed, where he'd been scrolling idly through notes. His green eyes softened as soon as he saw Fletcher—tired, vulnerable, but peaceful. A fond smile crept onto his muzzle. The screen still glowed with an open document: 18 pages typed, two shy of completion.

“...You worked yourself to the bone, huh, Fletch?” Chester murmured to himself. With a careful paw, he closed the laptop, the soft *click* of the hinge sounding loud in the otherwise hushed room. Moving gently, Chester slipped his arms beneath Fletcher's slim frame—one behind his shoulders, the other under his knees. Fletcher stirred faintly at the motion but didn't wake, his head naturally nestling against Chester's chest.

“Got you, Fletch... always.”

Chester straightened, cradling Fletcher with surprising ease. His

golden fur brushed against Fletcher's soft gray-and-white as he carefully crossed the small room. The mattress dipped slightly as he lowered Fletcher down onto the bed, pulling the blanket over him with deliberate care. For a moment, Chester lingered at the bedside, watching Fletcher's peaceful face. The dim glow of the desk lamp outlined the husky's relaxed features, making him look even softer, more vulnerable. Chester's green eyes warmed, a quiet smile tugging at his muzzle. He sat at the edge of the bed, brushing a stray tuft of fur from Fletcher's face.

“Sleep tight, Fletch.”



The morning light spilled softly through the blinds, painting pale gold lines across the rumpled sheets. The faint sounds of campus waking up—footsteps in the hallway, doors opening and closing, the distant hum of someone's music—drifted into the quiet room.

On the bed, Fletcher was still curled under the blanket, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm, muzzle relaxed in peaceful sleep.

Chester stirred awake beside him, blinking against the sunlight. For a moment, he looked confused—until he registered the warm weight next to him, the familiar scent of Fletcher's fur. His muzzle softened into a slow smile.

“Guess I didn't make it back to my own bed after all...”

He propped himself up on one elbow, green eyes studying

Fletcher's face in the stillness.

The sunlight shifted just enough to brush across Fletcher's face. His ears twitched, his nose crinkled, and slowly his blue eyes blinked open. For a hazy moment, he didn't register where he was—until his gaze landed directly on Chester's green eyes, only inches away.

There was a stillness in that instant, a pocket of quiet where the bustle of the dorm faded away. Fletcher's fur was slightly mussed from sleep, Chester's golden fur glowing faintly in the morning light. The retriever was already awake, propped on one elbow, his expression soft, caught somewhere between surprise and warmth.

“Morning, Fletch.”

Chester gave the husky a small smile. Fletcher blinked sleepily, a shy giggle escaping as his blue eyes met Chester's. His ears tilted back just a little as he whispered, “Hey, Chester... what are you doing here?”

Chester chuckled softly in return, his tail giving a lazy thump against the mattress.

“Guess I fell asleep next to you after hauling your overworked butt to bed last night. What can I say? You're comfy.”

His green eyes sparkled with both amusement and affection. He shifted a little closer, their muzzles now barely a paw's breadth apart.

“Don't worry, though. I made sure you got under the blanket first.”

“Wait, you carried me?” Fletcher asked, his voice hushed but tinged with fluster. A flush bloomed under his fur.

“Guilty. You were out cold at your desk, Fletch. Couldn't just leave you there all cramped up. So yeah, I scooped you up and tucked you

in.”

Chester grinned, utterly unbothered, leaning back on one elbow like he had been caught in the act but didn’t regret it. His green eyes sparkled with that playful, confident warmth.

“Didn’t mean to embarrass you. Just... wanted to take care of you.”

The morning light caught the edges of Chester’s golden fur, making him look almost like he was glowing in the quiet dorm room.

“I gained weight while I was studying for the SAT! I was gonna hide it, but now you would know it.”

Fletcher’s face reddened even deeper as he blurted out, half-joking, half-flustered. He gave a playful little protest, ears flicking back as his tail made an embarrassed twitch.

“Weight? Fletch, you’re light as a feather. I could’ve carried you with one paw.”

Chester burst into laughter, a rich, warm sound that filled the quiet morning. He shook his head, still leaning on one elbow as his green eyes softened.

“Besides, you’re perfect the way you are. Always have been.”

“Okay! Okay! You win! You’re gonna make me redder than a tomato!”

Fletcher squirmed under the weight of Chester’s words, ears pinned back as his blush deepened until it felt like it had spread across every inch of his muzzle. He flailed his paws a little before finally covering his face with them, laughing nervously.

“Redder than a tomato, huh? Guess I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Chester threw his head back with a delighted laugh, tail thumping

against the mattress. He shifted closer, gently tugging one of Fletcher's paws down so he could see his face again. His green eyes were warm, mischievous, but full of tenderness.

He leaned in just enough that Fletcher could feel his breath, but not so much that he crossed the line. Instead, Chester settled back with a grin, clearly enjoying how flustered Fletcher got under his affection.

“Alright, Mr. Tomato, how about we grab breakfast before class? Or are you planning to hide under the blanket all morning?”



The cafeteria buzzed with the morning crowd—trays clattering, chatter weaving through the air, and the scent of eggs, toast, and coffee drifting in waves. Sunlight poured through wide windows, catching on the polished tables where clusters of students huddled together, some still in half-zipped hoodies, others already dressed for class.

Fletcher and Chester stepped into the line together, trays in paw. Chester towered just slightly over Fletcher, his golden fur catching the light as he glanced over the selection with easy confidence. Fletcher, still a little pink around the ears from their earlier exchange, clutched his tray close, blue eyes darting between the food options and the tables already filling up.

“Alright, what’s it gonna be? Eggs and bacon... or are you going full studious-husky and grabbing fruit and yogurt?” said Chester.

Chester’s paw brushed Fletcher’s tray lightly, casual enough not to

draw attention, but enough to reassure. His green eyes glinted with playful challenge.

The cafeteria lady set another tray of scrambled eggs under the heat lamps, steam curling upward.

“I’ll go with fruit and yogurt, but not because I’m studious—but because I need some vitamins! After all, I crashed yesterday, you know.”

Fletcher shyly giggled, balancing his tray as he reached for a bowl of fruit and a small cup of yogurt. His tail flicked once behind him as he explained with a sheepish grin.

“Fair point. Guess I’m the reckless one, then—this plate’s all grease and carbs.”

Chester chuckled, his green eyes glowing with amusement as he grabbed his own tray of eggs, bacon, and toast. He bumped Fletcher’s shoulder gently, leaning close enough that his voice dropped lower.

“And yeah, I noticed. You work yourself too hard, Fletch. Vitamins or not, I’ll make sure you don’t burn yourself out again.”

The line shuffled forward, and soon they reached the seating area. Chester’s gaze swept over the cafeteria—groups of students already laughing together at larger tables, a few loners hunched over their trays and phones. He tilted his head toward a quiet corner near the window.

“Wanna sit somewhere out of the spotlight? Just us?”

Fletcher tilted his head with a playful grin, balancing his tray carefully as he started walking toward the corner table Chester had

pointed out. His blue eyes glimmered with mischief as he teased, “Wait, I did this when we were in high school, guiding us to the corner table when you first transferred. Now, you’re turning the tables on me?”

Chester nearly snorted into his coffee cup, caught mid-step. His tail wagged once, betraying his amusement, as he hurried to keep pace with Fletcher.

“Oh, so you noticed, huh? Yeah, maybe I did pick that up from you. Guess I learned from the best,” said Chester, grinning. They reached the quiet corner by the window, sunlight spilling across the table in a warm stripe. Chester set his tray down, then slid into the seat across from Fletcher, his green eyes softening as he looked at him.

“Thing is... back then, you were keeping me out of the spotlight. This time, I’m keeping us out of it. Don’t want anyone making things harder for you before you’re ready, Fletch.”

Chester dug into his bacon casually, like it was just another conversation, but his protective intent lingered in the air between them.

“Thanks. I guess I did feel nervous when we first got here. We don’t have any friends who know we’re together here after all...”

Fletcher fiddled with his spoon, stirring the yogurt absentmindedly, blue eyes lowering for a moment.

“Hey... I get it. New place, new faces, and we’re keeping this part of us quiet. It’s a lot.”

Chester reached out under the table, brushing the back of Fletcher’s paw with his own—a small, hidden touch.

“But we’ll figure it out. Together. Always.”

He gave a little smile then, a softer one than his usual confident grin, before taking a sip of his coffee.

The cafeteria hummed around them—voices, footsteps, the clatter of trays—but in their corner, it felt like the rest of the world had faded away.



Secret Date



The campus was alive with the soft hum of spring. Cherry blossoms drifted lazily from branches overhead, scattering across the cobblestone paths. Students sprawled across the lawn with books or soccer balls, laughter and guitar strings floating on the crisp breeze.

Fletcher and Chester walked side by side, blending seamlessly into the weekend crowd. Chester's paws rested casually in his pockets, his green eyes sweeping across the quad with that easy, confident air. Fletcher kept his backpack slung over one shoulder, his steps a little lighter than usual, ears flicking at the chatter around them.

To anyone watching, they looked like two friends taking a walk. But the small details told another story: how Fletcher drifted a little closer every few steps, how Chester slowed his pace so their shoulders almost brushed, and the way their eyes occasionally met with unspoken warmth before flicking back to the world around

them.

“Hard to believe this counts as a ‘date,’ huh? Walking around campus, surrounded by a hundred people, pretending we’re just... buddies,” said Chester. He nudged Fletcher’s elbow lightly, a teasing sparkle in his eyes, though his voice dipped softer, more tender, as he added, “Still... I kinda like it. Just being here with you.”

“Yeah... I like it too,” Fletcher smiled softly, his blue eyes shining as he murmured. His gaze lingered on Chester for a moment, the sunlight catching the faint blush on his cheeks. But then his voice dipped quieter, tinged with vulnerability as he admitted, “Though, sometimes, I wish we could just... not pretend.”

Chester slowed his steps, the easy grin on his muzzle softening into something more serious. He watched Fletcher carefully, his green eyes filled with warmth but shadowed with thought.

“...I know. Believe me, I feel it too. Every time I look at you and have to hold back... it eats at me a little.”

Chester glanced around—students scattered across the quad, a group tossing a frisbee, others sprawled under the blossoms. Then his gaze dropped back to Fletcher.

“But I don’t ever want you to feel unsafe. That’s the only reason we keep it quiet. When the time’s right—when *you’re* ready—I want the whole world to know you’re mine.”

His paw twitched at his side like he wanted to reach for Fletcher’s, but he resisted, his green eyes searching Fletcher’s face instead.

“Heh, you wanna hold my paw, don’t you?”

Fletcher tilted his head up, a shy but playful grin tugging at his

muzzle. His blue eyes gleamed with mischief as he whispered, just quiet enough for Chester alone.

Chester blinked, caught off guard for only half a second before his grin spread wide, his tail giving an unmistakable wag. He leaned closer as they walked, voice dropping to a low, teasing murmur.

“Guilty as charged. You make it *very* hard to resist, you know.”

Chester’s paw brushed Fletcher’s lightly—a fleeting contact, subtle enough that anyone passing might not notice, but charged enough to send a spark between them. Chester’s green eyes lingered on Fletcher’s, a mix of mischief and tenderness in them.

“...Say the word, Fletch, and I’ll hold it. Right here, right now.”

The breeze tugged at the cherry blossoms, a few petals drifting down around them, as if the campus itself was waiting for Fletcher’s answer.

Fletcher’s eyes flicked toward a tall, brick building just off the path—the Music Hall, its glass doors reflecting the spring sun. From the outside, it looked still and quiet, no students drifting in or out. Fletcher leaned closer to Chester with a shy, mischievous smile.

“Heh, how about we head into that building? It looks empty enough. Maybe inside, we can have our ‘secret date’?”

Chester’s ears perked, and a low chuckle escaped him. He cast a quick glance around the quad—students scattered on the grass, none paying attention to them—before his grin widened.

“A secret date in a music hall? Guess we’re upgrading from cafeteria corners to concert halls now.”

Without hesitation, Chester guided Fletcher toward the building,

pulling the door open for him with a mock bow.

“After you, maestro.”

♦

Inside, the Music Hall was hushed and cool, the faint smell of wood polish lingering in the air. Rows of empty seats faced a stage draped in heavy curtains. A grand piano sat off to the side, its black surface gleaming faintly in the dim light. The only sounds were the muffled creaks of the old floorboards beneath their paws.

“Looks like we’ve got the whole place to ourselves...” said Chester. The heavy doors closed behind them with a soft *thud*, muffling the distant chatter of the campus. The air inside was cool, carrying the faint scent of polished wood and old sheet music. Fletcher padded toward the piano, curiosity tugging at his steps. He lifted the fallboard and pressed a tentative paw to the keys. A few uneven notes rang out, echoing through the vast, empty hall. The sound was clumsy but oddly charming, a little melody of innocence. Fletcher giggled at himself, ears flicking shyly.

Chester watched from a few paces back, leaning against one of the seats with his arms folded. His green eyes shone with amusement as the uneven notes bounced across the empty space.

“Heh, not bad. If you keep practicing, you’ll be headlining the spring concert in no time.”

He pushed off the chair and walked up toward the stage, his tail swaying. His voice softened as he got closer, the playfulness melting

into something more tender.

“You look... really good up there, you know. Like you belong.”

The golden retriever hopped up onto the stage, the wood creaking faintly beneath his weight, and settled beside Fletcher at the piano bench, close enough their shoulders brushed.

Fletcher didn’t say a word. Instead, he let the keys rest quiet under his paw, then slowly shifted, his other paw reaching over. With a shy but certain motion, he slipped his fingers around Chester’s paw, holding it gently.

For a moment, the vast music hall felt impossibly small—just the two of them in a pocket of stillness, dust drifting through the sunlight. Chester blinked, his grin softening into something much deeper. His green eyes searched Fletcher’s face, his chest rising with a quiet breath as the weight of the gesture sank in. He squeezed Fletcher’s paw back, warm and steady, his thumb brushing lightly across the husky’s fur.

The stillness of the hall was suddenly broken by a faint creak from behind the heavy curtains. Fletcher’s ears shot up, blue eyes wide as he froze. Chester reacted instantly, squeezing Fletcher’s paw once before tugging him quietly off the bench. Together, they scrambled down from the stage and ducked behind the rows of seats, hearts racing.

The backstage door opened with a soft *click*. An indigo cat stepped out, his yellow eyes scanning the empty stage as if making sure the coast was clear. Slim and composed, he carried himself with a quiet grace, his tail swishing lightly behind him. Without a word, he

walked toward the grand piano, settling onto the bench Fletcher had just vacated.

He lifted his paws and began to play.

The first notes were soft, deliberate—a gentle melody that filled the hall as if it were elegance itself. The contrast was stark; where Fletcher's hesitant tapping had been playful and uneven, the cat's touch was sure, practiced, and delicate. The sound rippled through the space, echoing with an almost wistful tone.

“...Looks like we stumbled onto a concert,” Chester whispered to Fletcher while glancing at him, his green eyes glinting with amusement and a hint of wonder at the cat's unexpected talent.

The cat, unaware of the hidden audience, continued to play—his expression calm, almost vulnerable, as though he was sharing something with the empty room.

Fletcher and Chester exchanged a look, then quietly rose from their hiding place. They slipped into the front row of seats, close to the stage but tucked into the shadows. Their paws found each other again, hidden between the seats, warm and steady.

The cat remained completely unaware. His yellow eyes were half-lidded, his slim frame swaying ever so slightly as he lost himself in the melody. Each note bloomed and faded in the wide, empty space, carrying a weight of longing that seemed almost personal.

“...He's good. Really good. Almost feels like we shouldn't even be here, like we're intruding on something private,” Fletcher whispered to Chester, his blue eyes softened by the music.

For a few stolen minutes, it felt like a secret world—just the three

of them, bound by the music, though only two knew it.

The final notes of the cat's melody lingered in the air, hanging like mist before fading into silence. His yellow eyes, half-lidded in focus, flickered up—and then froze.

The cat blinked, his paws hovering above the keys as he noticed the pair in the front row. Fletcher and Chester, seated close, their paws unmistakably joined between them.

The quiet of the hall sharpened. The cat's tail twitched once, betraying his surprise, though his face remained calm, composed, almost guarded.

“...I didn't realize I had an audience.”

His gaze lingered for a beat longer, shifting briefly to where their paws were linked, then back up to their faces. Not hostile, not mocking—just... *knowing*.

Chester stiffened slightly, instinctively squeezing Fletcher's paw tighter, as if to silently reassure Fletcher.

The hall felt suddenly bigger, the distance between the piano and the front row stretching with tension. The cat's expression remained unreadable, but the fact was undeniable: their secret wasn't so secret anymore, at least not to him.



Ian Taylor



“We... didn’t mean to intrude...”

Fletcher’s voice wavered, hushed but sincere, carrying across the empty hall.

The cat’s yellow eyes lingered on Fletcher, then flicked briefly to Chester before returning to the husky. His tail gave another slow swish, though his posture relaxed a little. He lowered his paws from the keys, letting the last note settle into silence.

“...You didn’t intrude. This hall isn’t mine. Music’s meant to be heard,” said the cat.

For a brief moment, his gaze drifted downward again to their joined paws. Something flickered across his expression—not disdain, not amusement, but something quieter, like recognition.

Chester finally spoke, “We’ll head out if you want space. Didn’t mean to bother your practice.”

“No. Stay, if you want. Doesn’t matter to me.”

The cat looked back at the keys, though his ears angled slightly toward them—a subtle sign he was more aware than he let on.

The cat didn’t say another word. Instead, he lowered his gaze to the piano, paws settling lightly on the keys again. After a quiet pause, a new melody began to bloom—gentle at first, then swelling with a wistful, almost aching beauty. The notes drifted through the hall like ripples across a lake at dusk, tender and full of longing. Though Fletcher and Chester didn’t recognize the piece, it felt as if the music was speaking directly to them—to their unspoken hopes, their fears, their secret closeness.

Chester’s green eyes softened, his usual grin replaced with something quieter, more reflective. He squeezed Fletcher’s paw under the seat, his thumb brushing lightly across Fletcher’s fur in time with the music.

Chester whispered, more to himself than Fletcher, “...Feels like he’s playing straight out of our hearts.”

Fletcher’s blue eyes caught the light of the stage, wide and glimmering as he listened. Each phrase of the melody seemed to tug gently at something inside him—the longing to be open, the comfort of being beside Chester, the fragile beauty of the moment they were sharing.

The cat played on, expression calm, but his tail flicked in the silence between phrases. His posture was controlled, but the tenderness in his playing betrayed a side of him more vulnerable than his words had shown.

The music hall seemed to hold its breath, the three of them bound together by notes that said what none of them quite could.

The last, lingering notes drifted into silence, fading into the rafters of the hall. The cat's paws lifted from the keys slowly, and for a moment, only the faint ticking of the old building filled the air. He turned slightly on the bench, his yellow eyes finding Fletcher and Chester again. His voice was calm, even, but there was a quiet curiosity in it.

“...Do you know what that song was?”

Chester shook his head lightly, giving a small grin, though his paw stayed firmly linked with Fletcher's beneath the seat, as if the song gave him some kind of strength.

The atmosphere hung somewhere between tender and tense—the cat's question carrying more weight than just music, like he was testing what they heard and how they would answer.

Fletcher's ears tilted back slightly, and he gave a shy smile, his blue eyes soft in the dim light of the hall. His voice came quiet, but sincere, “No... but it was beautiful, like it was directly speaking to me.”

The cat studied him for a long moment, his yellow eyes unreadable. His tail flicked once before he leaned back slightly on the bench, paws resting in his lap.

“...It's Tchaikovsky. The Seasons: June.”

The cat looked back down at the keys, brushing one lightly with a single claw, as though weighing whether to say more. Finally, he glanced back at Fletcher and Chester, his tone calm, but laced with

something quieter—recognition, maybe empathy.

“Funny how music says what words can’t. Sometimes it tells truths we’re not ready to admit out loud.”

The silence stretched for a beat before the cat straightened slightly on the bench, smoothing the front of his shirt as though reminding himself of formality.

“...I’m Ian. Ian Taylor. Sophomore, Classical Music major.”

He let the words settle, his tone quiet but not cold. His tail swayed once behind him as he studied their faces, his posture polite but reserved.

Chester studied Ian closely, sensing no hostility in him. Still holding Fletcher’s paw, he leaned forward slightly in his seat and spoke, “Chester Davis. Economics, freshman.”

“I’m Fletcher. Fletcher Carter. I study Psychology, and I’m also a freshman,” said Fletcher with a gentle smile.

“...Nice to meet you,” said Ian. He gave a small nod, his yellow eyes lingering on Fletcher a second longer than courtesy might demand. His tail curled once behind him before settling.

“Psychology, huh? Makes sense.”

The comment was vague, almost enigmatic, as if he knew something he didn’t say out loud. His gaze shifted briefly to Chester, then back to Fletcher, his expression smoothing again into polite neutrality.

Chester raised a brow at the odd response, his green eyes narrowing slightly as he leaned back in his chair. His tone stayed casual, but his body language made it clear he was watching Ian closely.

“...You a regular here, Ian? At the piano, I mean.”

Ian shrugged one shoulder, voice calm, steady.

“When it’s empty, yeah. Been coming here since I was a freshman. Easier than practice rooms... less people watching.”

“Do you always play Tchaikovsky?”

Fletcher tilted his head, his blue eyes bright with curiosity as he asked softly.

For the first time, Ian’s expression shifted—a subtle flicker of something deeper in his yellow eyes. His tail curled slowly around one leg as he looked directly at Fletcher.

“...No. I chose that piece for you. For the both of you.”

The words landed heavy in the stillness of the hall. He didn’t look smug or playful—just calm, almost vulnerable in his honesty. His paws rested on the keys again, though he didn’t play, his ears angled forward ever so slightly as if bracing for a reaction. Chester asked back immediately.

“...For us? What do you mean by that?”

Chester stiffened beside Fletcher, his green eyes narrowing, as if he were questioning if he had heard right. Ian didn’t flinch under Chester’s gaze. He kept his eyes on Fletcher, his voice even but carrying a quiet weight.

“Tchaikovsky knew what it was like... to live with a part of himself hidden. That song carries it. Longing. Hope. Fear. I thought... maybe you’d hear it too.”

Fletcher’s blue eyes locked with Ian’s steady yellow ones, the silence stretching between them. With a small swallow, his voice

came out quiet but honest.

“I... think I did hear something like that...”

Ian’s ears flicked subtly, his expression unreadable at first. Then, slowly, he nodded, the faintest softness slipping past his reserved exterior. His paws hovered just above the keys, as if considering another song, but he didn’t play.

“...Then it spoke right,” said Ian, almost murmuring.

Chester shifted in his seat, his green eyes darting between Fletcher and Ian, his paw still tight around Fletcher’s beneath the seat.

“Music might speak, yeah. But people speak too. If you’ve got something to say to us, Ian... better to just say it,” Chester said, his voice came cautious, controlled.

Ian exhaled softly through his nose, his gaze flicking to Chester before returning to Fletcher. His tail flicked once against the piano bench, a sign of hesitation.

“...I don’t usually say things out loud. Music’s easier. But... maybe you two aren’t as different from me as I thought.”

♦

Fletcher tilted his head slightly, his voice quiet but steady as he asked, “What do you mean by that?”

The question hung in the vast emptiness of the hall, echoing faintly against the wood and velvet.

Ian’s yellow eyes lingered on Fletcher, searching, measuring. His tail curled slowly around the bench leg, a nervous tell he probably

didn't realize he was showing. Finally, he exhaled and spoke, his tone low, deliberate.

“...I know what that feels like. The longing. The need to keep something close, hidden, even when it should be simple.”

His gaze dropped briefly to the keys, one paw pressing a single soft note that lingered like an unfinished thought.

“I know what that feels like. Because it's me too,” said Ian, softer, almost confessional.

Chester stiffened beside Fletcher, green eyes narrowing protectively as his grip on Fletcher's paw tightened. His voice came cautious, skeptical, though not hostile, “...You're saying you're like us?”

“Yes.”

Ian's nod was small, but certain. The silence that followed felt heavier than before—not tense, but charged, like a fragile truth just exposed.

Fletcher lowered his voice, his ears flicking back in caution as he asked, “Does anyone else know?”

Ian tilted his head slightly, his yellow eyes calm but steady as he answered.

“...A few. Friends I trust. I don't hide it, but I don't announce it either. If someone asks, I'll answer. If not... I let the music say it for me.”

His tail flicked once, then curled neatly around his leg, his posture composed again.

“...Guess that's one way to handle it,” said Chester, still guarded,

but more respectful now.

Ian didn't argue, didn't defend.

"That actually sounds... brave," said Fletcher. His blue eyes softened, his voice carrying both admiration and a trace of shyness.

Ian blinked, his ears flicking subtly at the word. His gaze lifted to meet Fletcher's, and for the first time, there was a visible crack in his calm reserve—a flicker of something like surprise, maybe even gratitude.

"...Maybe. Or maybe it's just easier than pretending."

His paw pressed a quiet chord on the piano, letting it fade. His yellow eyes lingered on Fletcher for another breath before sliding away, as though holding eye contact any longer might have given too much away.

Chester leaned back slightly in his seat, his green eyes fixed on Ian, but his tone softened now, less guarded than before.

"Either way... takes guts. More than most."

The room fell into a fragile stillness again, the air heavy with truths just under the surface.

"Well, I'm glad we got to hear you play, Ian. And... thanks."

Fletcher gave a shy but sincere smile, his ears tilting slightly as his voice carried gently across the hall. Ian stilled, his paws resting lightly on the keys. He blinked once, his yellow eyes flicking to Fletcher, then away again. For a moment, his usually composed expression softened, almost fragile.

"...You're welcome."

Ian said hesitantly. He pressed a single, low note on the piano—not

starting another song, just filling the silence for a heartbeat. His tail flicked once, betraying a thought he didn't say out loud.

Chester leaned back in his chair, his grin eased back onto his muzzle. He gave Fletcher's paw a squeeze under the seat before adding, his voice lighter.

"Guess we owe you one, Ian. Not every day you get a private concert."

Fletcher rose slowly from his seat, his paw still linked with Chester's under the row until the last moment. He offered Ian a gentle smile, his ears flicking back slightly as he spoke softly, "We should probably let you have your space again. Thanks for sharing the music with us, Ian."

Chester stood too. He gave Ian a polite nod—cautious, but respectful.

"Yeah. We'll get out of your fur. Appreciate the music."

The two turned toward the tall double doors, footsteps muffled against the old carpet. As Fletcher's paw brushed against the handle, Ian's voice carried quietly across the empty hall.

"... You're welcome. Both of you. Anytime."

The words echoed faintly, lingering in the cool air even after Ian lowered his gaze back toward the piano. Chester glanced at Fletcher, his green eyes softened now, his grin faint but warm as he murmured just for him, "Guess we made a... complicated new acquaintance, huh?"

The heavy doors creaked softly as they stepped out into the spring sunlight, the music hall fading behind them. The campus was bathed

in soft light, blossoms drifting across the cobblestone walkways as the breeze carried the sound of chatter and distant laughter. Students milled about—some sprawled on the grass, others heading off with books tucked under their arms.

Fletcher and Chester walked side by side along the main path, the echo of Ian's words still lingering in the spaces between them: *"I don't hide it, but I don't announce it either."*

Neither spoke at first. The weight of the moment back in the music hall sat between them, not heavy, but quietly powerful. Fletcher's blue eyes flicked down, then up again, catching the easy sway of Chester's stride. Chester's green eyes glanced at him once, then back ahead, the faintest trace of thoughtfulness in his face.

And then—without a word—Fletcher's paw drifted toward Chester's. Chester noticed immediately, hesitated only a heartbeat, and then his golden paw found Fletcher's, fingers interlacing naturally.

They kept walking. No dramatic gestures, no whispers exchanged. Just the simple fact of their paws joined together, out in the open, while the world moved around them.

A couple of passing students glanced their way, but no one said anything. The breeze stirred again, carrying a few more petals across their path.

For the first time, Fletcher and Chester didn't let go.





On Crossed Roads



The library hummed with a faint, steady rhythm: pages turning, keyboards clicking, the occasional squeak of a chair. Dusty shafts of light spilled through tall windows, painting the rows of shelves and long tables in pale gold.

At one of the tables, Fletcher sat with a psychology text open in front of him, dog-eared and lined with sticky notes. His blue eyes traced the words carefully, a small crease in his brow. He was steady, quiet, wrapped in his work.

Two tables over, Adam sat with his laptop and an economics workbook. His broad shoulders were hunched slightly, earbuds dangling unused around his neck. His brown eyes flicked idly around the room once or twice, skimming the familiar faces of classmates. When his gaze landed on Fletcher, he didn't linger—not yet. He exhaled and forced his attention back to his notes, jaw tight.

Minutes passed. The quiet stretched.

Then the library door opened with a soft *creak*. Chester stepped inside, easy and confident as always, his green eyes searching until they landed on Fletcher. His grin appeared instantly. Without hesitation, he padded across the floor and dropped into the seat right next to Fletcher.

“Hey, genius. Didn’t think I’d find you buried in books again.”

Before Fletcher could answer, Chester’s paw slid across the tabletop, finding Fletcher’s and lacing their fingers together. Natural. Warm. Certain.

Fletcher blushed, ears flicking, but didn’t pull away. Their paws stayed linked in the quiet sunlight, the gesture tender but unhidden.

Across the room, Adam’s pen stilled in his paw. His brown eyes flicked up—just a glance at first, then a longer look. He saw them. Fletcher’s shy smile, Chester’s open warmth, the quiet intimacy of two boys not hiding, at least not here.

Adam’s chest tightened. He looked away quickly, jaw clenching as his fingers drummed hard against the page of his workbook. His eyes dropped back to his notes, but the words blurred, unreadable.

Fletcher leaned closer, his blue eyes soft behind the glow of the desk lamp. His voice dropped to a whisper, meant only for Chester.

“Hey, I was just wrapping up. Wanna go have dinner?”

Chester’s grin widened, his green eyes flicking warmly over Fletcher’s notes before settling on him. He gave Fletcher’s paw a little squeeze under the table.

“Dinner with you? Always. Though I’m not letting you order just

fruit and yogurt again.”

He chuckled softly, tail giving a quiet thump against the chair leg.

A few seats away, Adam’s pen hovered over his notebook, unmoving. His ears twitched, catching the hushed exchange. He didn’t turn his head, but his brown eyes slid sideways, just enough to catch the sight of Fletcher and Chester’s joined paws again. A hot pang hit his chest—sharp, unwanted. His jaw tightened as he scribbled something meaningless across the margin of his notes, pretending to work.

The library remained hushed, sunlight stretching longer across the floor as the day tilted toward evening.

Fletcher closed his book gently, sliding it into his bag with a soft rustle. He rose from his chair, still holding onto Chester’s paw as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Chester flashed him a grin, pushing back his chair with an easy stretch. His green eyes glimmered with warmth as he murmured, just for Fletcher.

“Come on, before all the good food’s gone.”

Together, they walked down the aisle of tables, paws linked casually between them. Fletcher’s tail swayed softly as they moved, and Chester walked just a step closer than necessary—steady.

Adam didn’t move. He kept his gaze on the half-finished notes in front of him, though his paw had stilled over the page. His brown eyes flicked up only once—just enough to catch the sight of their retreating figures, the husky’s soft laugh blending with the retriever’s easy stride.

The sound stuck in his chest. His jaw tightened as he exhaled sharply through his nose, pressing his pen harder into the page until the ink bled.

The library's quiet hum resumed around him, but Adam sat frozen, his thoughts too loud to hear anything else.

♦

The cafeteria hummed with the sounds of dinnertime rush—trays sliding, cutlery clattering, voices rising and falling in waves. The smell of grilled chicken, fried rice, and something tomato-based lingered in the air.

Fletcher and Chester stepped inside, paws still loosely linked until they reached for trays.

“So... vitamins again, Mr. Health-Conscious? Or are you actually gonna eat like a college student tonight?” said Chester, as he leaned toward Fletcher, his green eyes scanning the options with a smirk.

Fletcher blushed faintly, his blue eyes darting over the trays of food. His tail flicked once, shy but amused.

They shuffled forward with the line, surrounded by groups of chatting students. A few glanced their way, but quickly turned back to their own conversations. Chester kept his posture easy, confident, like there was nothing unusual at all about them being here together.

The line moved closer to the hot meals. Steam rose from trays of food, the scents stronger now.

“If you don't pick something hearty, I'm doubling up and sneaking

half onto your plate.”

Chester nudged Fletcher gently with his elbow, his voice low but full of warmth.

Fletcher slid his tray along the counter, the steam from the serving trays curling in the warm air. He gave a shy little smile, his blue eyes flicking toward Chester.

“Okay, okay. I’ll have tomato sauce spaghetti today.”

Chester burst into an approving chuckle, tail giving a wag. He grabbed his own plate—loaded generously with chicken and potatoes—before bumping Fletcher’s shoulder with his.

“Now that’s more like it. You’ll finally eat something that doesn’t come with a vitamin label.”

They moved past the counter together, trays balanced, scanning for a table. The cafeteria was buzzing—clusters of students laughing over meals, some bent over laptops, others half-asleep over their trays.

“Corner table again? Or should we risk sitting in the middle of the chaos today?”

“Our spot. The corner table.”

Fletcher smiled faintly, his tail giving a small wag as he tilted his head toward the back of the room. Chester’s grin widened instantly, green eyes brightening. He gave Fletcher’s paw a quick squeeze before leading the way, weaving through the clusters of tables with easy confidence.

They reached the far corner, where sunlight from the tall windows faded into shadow. It was quieter here—just the hum of conversation

from afar and the faint clatter of trays at the other end of the hall. Chester set his tray down first, then pulled Fletcher's chair out just slightly with a playful flourish.

"After you, sir. Your throne awaits."

When Fletcher sat, Chester slid into the chair beside him instead of across, close enough that their arms brushed. Their trays steamed in front of them, the tomato-sauced spaghetti glowing red in the warm cafeteria lights. The corner table felt almost like home now—tucked away from the cafeteria buzz, but with a soft hum of life surrounding them.

Fletcher twirled a forkful of spaghetti, the tomato sauce steaming gently. His blue eyes brightened as he leaned closer to Chester, ears flicking in an animated rhythm as they traded stories.

"So, Professor Wilford piled another set of readings on us. He said it's about 'building a foundation'... but honestly, it feels like he's trying to bury us alive."

Chester chuckled around a bite of chicken, shaking his head. His tail thumped lightly against the floor, green eyes glimmering with mischief.

"At least it's readings. My econ professor dropped a surprise quiz this morning. Half the class looked like they were about to revolt."

They shared a quiet laugh, the sound blending with the distant chatter of the hall. Fletcher pushed a piece of spaghetti around his plate absentmindedly, his tail wagging slowly under the table.

"Still... you looked way happier walking out of the library with me earlier than you do with Wilford's assignments. I'll take that as a

win.”

Chester nudged Fletcher’s shoulder gently, his smile quieter now—more personal, just for him.

Then, a shadow stretched across their table.

“...Mind if I sit with you?”

Ian stood there, tray in paw. His slim frame was neat, his yellow eyes calm but observant, flicking once from Fletcher to Chester, and—just for a heartbeat—to their trays set close together. His tone was even, but the way his tail flicked lightly behind him betrayed a sliver of hesitation. He was not intruding loudly, but there was a subtle gravity in his presence, like his choosing *their* table had intent. The corner table, once just theirs, suddenly felt smaller, the space charged with an unspoken question.

Chester straightened, his green eyes narrowing slightly in surprise. He glanced at Fletcher, his paw brushing subtly against Fletcher’s knee under the table—a silent check-in before he said anything.

“Hey, Ian. Have a seat.”

Then, before Chester could say anything, Fletcher spoke up first. A shy but genuine smile curled onto his muzzle.

Ian gave the faintest nod in return, his yellow eyes steady but calm. Without another word, he slid his tray onto the table and took the seat across from them.

Chester leaned back slightly in his chair, green eyes watching Ian carefully. His paw brushed against Fletcher’s knee again.

“Good to see you again, Ian.”

“...Likewise.”

The table fell into a brief silence, filled only by the distant hum of laughter and trays in the background. Chester, sensing the subtle current passing beneath the ordinary act of eating together, made a joke.

“Didn’t peg you for cafeteria food, Ian. Thought you’d be more of a coffee-and-piano type.”

Ian didn’t flinch, instead setting down his utensils neatly. His tail flicked once behind him, but his tone stayed even.

“Even pianists need dinner.”

The table turned quiet once more. Then, just as the hum in the background was about to fill the space again, Fletcher asked a question, an ordinary question, for an ordinary act of having a meal together.

“So, Ian. What’s your favorite food?”

Ian paused with his fork halfway to his mouth. His yellow eyes lifted to meet Fletcher’s, calm but thoughtful. For a second, it seemed like he was weighing whether to answer at all. Then, he lowered his fork and spoke in that measured, even tone.

“...Lasagna. My mother used to make it every Sunday. It’s... familiar. Feels like home.”

His gaze lingered for a moment longer before dropping back to his plate. His fork moved again, slow, precise.

“Lasagna, huh? Didn’t think you’d be a comfort-food type. I was betting on something fancy, like foie gras.”

Chester smirked, leaning back in his chair with an easy grin. Again, Ian didn’t laugh much.

“...Simple things matter more than fancy ones.”

Ian’s words hung in the air, understated but carrying weight.

“Is that why you picked tomato sauce spaghetti for dinner as well?”

Fletcher twirled a strand of spaghetti around his fork, then looked up at Ian with a curious, almost gentle expression. His voice was soft, thoughtful.

The question hung in the space between them.

Ian stilled for a moment, his yellow eyes flicking to Fletcher. There was a pause—as if the husky had brushed against something beneath the surface. Ian set his fork down carefully, his movements deliberate. His tail gave one slow curl before settling.

“...Maybe. Perhaps I wanted to have something similar.”

Ian’s gaze lingered on Fletcher’s for a fraction longer, steady, before dropping back to his plate. There was no defensiveness, but a quiet recognition—like he felt Fletcher had caught a glimpse of something, and he didn’t mind, not entirely.

“So you’re saying our cafeteria spaghetti is up there with homemade lasagna? That’s high praise.”

Chester leaned forward slightly, his grin still there. Ian didn’t look at Chester. Instead, he pushed a piece of pasta around his plate, his tone flat but carrying a subtle undertone.

“...Sometimes it’s not the food. It’s the company.”

“Well, I hope we’re being a good company then.”

Fletcher smiled shyly, his ears flicking as he lifted his gaze from his plate to Ian. His voice was soft, a little tentative but warm.

Ian looked up at him, yellow eyes steady. For a beat, there was no

change in his expression—and then, faintly, almost imperceptibly, the corner of his mouth curved into the barest shadow of a smile.

“...You are.”

He lowered his gaze again, spearing another bite of spaghetti with deliberate calm, but his tail flicked once behind him, betraying a ripple of something more.

Chester nodded toward Fletcher with a playful smirk, though his paw brushed against Fletcher’s under the table—subtle, steady reassurance.

♦

The cafeteria’s noise faded behind them as the doors swung shut. Outside, the sky was brushed in gold and violet, the first stars timid against the horizon. Students filtered in and out, their laughter and chatter carried on the cool evening air.

Ian walked with Fletcher and Chester just far enough from the crowd. The light caught the edge of his indigo fur, making his yellow eyes seem softer than usual. He paused at the path’s fork, turning toward them with his usual composed calm. His tail flicked once, measured, before he spoke.

“...Thanks for letting me join you. Dinner was... better than usual.”

He didn’t elaborate, but his gaze lingered briefly on Fletcher, then Chester, as though the meaning sat just beneath the words.

Chester tipped his head. With his easy grin, he said, “Anytime.

Guess we'll see you around, Ian."

"Yeah. See you."

Ian nodded once, precise and understated. Then, he turned down the side path, his slim frame soon fading into the lengthening shadows of the evening.

The quiet settled again as Fletcher and Chester were left at the fork in the path, the last blush of sun painting the sky above them.

Just as Fletcher turned to speak, Chester's phone buzzed sharply in his pocket. Chester frowned, pulling it out. The screen flashed *Professor McGregor*. He hesitated for a breath, then swiped to answer.

"Hello? ...Yes, Professor?"

A pause. Fletcher watched, ears flicking nervously at Chester's sudden seriousness.

Chester's green eyes sharpened, his grin gone now as his professor's voice filtered through the receiver.

"There's something wrong with the report? ...I understand. Yes, I'll come by your office right away."

He lowered the phone, sighed, and looked at Fletcher, his paw brushing Fletcher's shoulder in reassurance.

"Sorry, Fletch. McGregor says there's an issue with the econ report I submitted. Wants me in his office now. Can't put it off."

Fletcher offered a gentle smile, his blue eyes warm despite the interruption. His voice was soft but certain.

"It's okay. I'll walk you to the econ building, and then I'll go back to the dorm and wait for you. How about that?"

Chester exhaled, the tension in his shoulders easing. His green eyes brightened. He squeezed Fletcher's paw once, firm and grateful.

"Yeah... I'd like that. Thanks, Fletch."

They fell into step together along the cobblestone path, the last streaks of sunset fading into indigo overhead. The campus grew quieter as the dinner rush died down, lanterns flickering on across the walkways.

The economics building loomed ahead, tall windows glowing faintly with office lights. Chester slowed as they reached the steps, turning toward Fletcher.

"Don't wait up too long if it takes a while. But I'll be back as soon as I can."

He leaned down just slightly, close enough that Fletcher could see the green sparkle in his eyes even in the dim light.

Fletcher squeezed Chester's paw firmly, his blue eyes glowing with quiet certainty as he whispered, "I'll be waiting."

Chester paused, looking down at him with softened green eyes. He squeezed Fletcher's paw back once, then let go reluctantly.

"You're the best, Fletch. I won't be long."

He gave Fletcher a final warm look before turning and heading up the steps, his golden fur catching the last flare of light before he disappeared into the building. The heavy doors shut with a muted *thud*, leaving Fletcher in the cooling evening air.

Fletcher walked back to the dorm quietly, backpack slung over one shoulder, his paw brushing absently against his side where Chester's warmth had lingered. His blue eyes drifted upward, catching the faint

glow of the first stars.

The evening air was cool now, the last threads of daylight fading into deep blue. The yard stretched wide, dotted with lantern-lit paths. Cherry blossom petals skittered across the stones with the breeze.

A figure detached from the edge of the path—tall, broad-shouldered, moving with a slow, deliberate stride. Adam. His brown eyes tracked Fletcher with an intensity Fletcher didn’t notice until Adam was close enough that the sound of his footfalls could not be ignored.

“...Hey.”

Adam cleared his throat, his voice low and gruff, carrying a weight he didn’t quite mask.

It was not much, but it halted Fletcher mid-step. Adam stood a few feet away, his posture taut, like someone fighting himself just to be here. His athletic build was shadowed by the lantern light, his ears pinned back slightly in what looked like discomfort—or nerves.

For a moment, the yard felt strangely quiet. Just Fletcher, and the unexpected presence of a hyena who didn’t usually bother with anyone.

Slowly, Fletcher turned, blue eyes wide, and managed a soft, uncertain, “Um... hi?”

Adam stood just a few feet away, shoulders squared but tense. His brown eyes flicked over Fletcher quickly, then darted away, as though he couldn’t quite hold the gaze. His paws were shoved awkwardly into the pockets of his jacket, tail still behind him.

“...You’re in my history class. Right? 101. With Professor

Harland.”

The words came out clipped, almost defensive, like he was justifying why he was talking to Fletcher at all.

“Yeah... I do.”

Fletcher shifted his weight slightly, cautious but polite. His blue eyes flicked up to meet Adam’s for just a moment before dropping again.

Adam nodded once, jaw working as though he was chewing on words before letting them out.

“...You’re always so focused. In class, I mean. Writing notes. Like you’re... really into it.”

His brown eyes glanced at Fletcher, then away again, like holding eye contact cost him something. His paw tightened in his jacket pocket. After a beat, his voice dropped lower, more deliberate.

“...And in the library earlier. You looked focused then too. But... you weren’t alone.”

The last words hung heavier in the cool twilight air, the unspoken weight behind them obvious. His tone wasn’t mocking, but there was a tension there—something deep beneath.





Adam Lee



“Y-you saw that?”

Fletcher’s ears flicked back. His blue eyes widened, the shy blush rising to his cheeks under the lantern glow.

Adam’s gaze sharpened for a moment, then skittered away just as quickly. His jaw flexed, words grinding out unevenly, gruff as though admitting them cost him something.

“...Yeah. I saw. In the library. With him. You weren’t hiding it.”

He exhaled sharply through his nose, his tail giving one agitated flick. His tone wasn’t cruel, but tight, like he was holding back a storm.

“...Guess you don’t care who notices.”

The air between them thickened. Adam’s brown eyes darted back to Fletcher’s face—there was no hate there, only something rawer: conflict, a tangled mix of something he couldn’t untangle.

Fletcher's ears dipped low, his tail brushing nervously at his side as he stammered out, "I... I didn't think anyone was watching..."

Adam exhaled hard through his nose, like he was frustrated at something he couldn't name.

"...Yeah, well. People watch. Even when you think they don't."

His voice carried a bite, but it wasn't aimed at Fletcher—more at himself. His paw clenched in his jacket pocket, tail flicking once before going still. After a beat, his tone dipped, quieter, more conflicted.

"...Still. You didn't look scared. Just... comfortable. Like it was easy."

His eyes flicked toward Fletcher again, just briefly, and there was a raw edge there—envy, longing, and anger all tangled up.

"...You don't get it. You sit there, smiling, holding paws like it's nothing. Like the whole world won't care. But it does. People notice. People talk. And not everyone's gonna just... let it slide."

He shook his head, a rough laugh slipping out—humorless, jagged.

"...You think it's brave? I think it's reckless. You make it look simple, but it's not. It's not safe. Not for everyone."

His tail lashed once behind him, his voice rising before dropping into a growl of frustration.

"...I wish I could just... be like that. But I can't. I *can't*."

He swallowed hard, his throat working as though the words scraped on their way out. For a moment, his eyes locked on Fletcher, then he looked away sharply, shoulders tight as if bracing against

himself.

The yard felt heavier now, the evening air pressing in. Fletcher could almost hear the crack in Adam's voice beneath the bitterness, something softer buried deep inside.

“I’m... sorry.”

Fletcher’s ears folded back as he whispered softly. His voice was small, uncertain, but sincere.

Adam let out a low, humorless laugh. His brown eyes flicked toward Fletcher, sharp but pained.

“...Don’t be. You’ve got nothing to be sorry for. You get to walk around like it’s normal. Like it’s easy. Like it doesn’t eat you alive.”

His tail lashed once, the tension in his body clear in every line.

“...Me? I can’t even look at myself in the mirror some days. And then I see you. Sitting there. Laughing. Holding someone’s paw like the world won’t burn you for it. And I—”

He cut himself short, jaw clenching so hard it looked painful. The lantern light caught the strain in his expression, a storm barely contained.

“...I don’t know if I hate it, or if I... want it.”

The words hung in the cool night air, jagged and vulnerable all at once.

Fletcher, moved by the crack in Adam’s voice, reached out without thinking. His blue eyes were gentle, his paw trembling slightly as he tried to touch Adam’s arm—a simple gesture, wordless comfort.

But instinct took over.

Adam recoiled violently, his arm slamming down and knocking Fletcher's paw away with brutal force. The sound of it snapped against the quiet yard.

“Ouch!”

Fletcher jerked his paw back, the sting sharp. A thin red line bloomed across the fur on the back of his paw, already swelling into a small cut. He cradled it instinctively, ears folding down in shock.

Adam froze, brown eyes widening as the realization hit. His chest heaved once, twice, before his gaze flicked to Fletcher's injured paw. For a fleeting moment, his mask cracked—fear, regret, guilt flashing raw across his face.

But it was gone as fast as it had come. His jaw tightened, his fists balling in his pockets again. His voice came out low, harsh.

“...Don’t. Don’t do that. Don’t—”

Adam couldn’t finish the sentence. His tail lashed once before he turned sharply, putting distance between them, his broad frame swallowed by the shadows of the yard.

Fletcher was left standing alone, the sting in his paw hot under the cool night air, the echo of Adam’s storm lingering long after he was gone.

♦

The dorm room was quiet, lit only by the desk lamp on Fletcher’s side. Fletcher sat on the edge of his bed, a notebook open in his lap though he hadn’t touched it. His blue eyes flicked toward the door

every few seconds, his injured paw resting lightly against his leg.

The click of the door handle broke the silence.

Chester stepped in, golden fur still warm from the hallway lights. He looked tired from the meeting with Professor McGregor, but when his green eyes landed on Fletcher, he grinned automatically.

“Hey, Fletch. Sorry that took so long. McGregor nearly buried me alive in spreadsheets.”

Fletcher lifted his head, a weak smile tugging at his muzzle.

“Welcome back.”

Chester crossed the room, setting his bag down. But then—his eyes caught on Fletcher’s paw. The faint cut, the redness against the husky’s gray-white fur. His grin vanished in an instant, replaced by a sharp, worried focus.

“Fletch... what happened to your paw?”

He crouched down in front of Fletcher, green eyes searching his face with concern, his paw hovering just above Fletcher’s injured one, careful not to touch until Fletcher let him.

“I-it’s nothing.”

Fletcher quickly pulled his paw back a little, ears flattening as he stammered.

His blue eyes darted away, the weak smile still clinging to his muzzle even though it didn’t quite reach his eyes.

Chester didn’t buy it. His green eyes narrowed, his paw reaching gently but firmly to cradle Fletcher’s injured one.

“Fletch... this isn’t nothing. You’re hurt.”

He looked up, searching Fletcher’s face, his tail stilling behind

him. His voice softened, though the edge of concern didn't fade.

“Talk to me. Please. What happened?”

The dorm fell quiet again, only the faint hum of the heater filling the pause between them. Chester's grip was careful but unyielding, as though he was silently promising he wouldn't let this go until Fletcher gave him something real.

“I... met somebody. At the yard, on the way back to the dorm...”

Fletcher lowered his gaze, the words stumbling out, hesitant and broken in places.

“He said he saw us together in the library earlier today... holding paws...”

He swallowed, clutching his injured paw lightly in his lap.

“He seemed... troubled by it. Not like, hating it... but more like... shaken, conflicted...”

Fletcher's blue eyes flicked to Chester for just a second before dropping again. His ears folded back as his voice dipped even quieter.

“I tried to reach him... hold his arm... but—”

He trailed off, unable to finish.

Chester's green eyes darkened with anger, the fur along his neck bristling. His paw tightened gently but firmly over Fletcher's wrist, just above the cut.

“...He did this to you?”

Fletcher lowered his head, ears drooping as he quietly nodded.

Chester's grip tightened slightly on Fletcher's paw—not enough to hurt, but enough to anchor.

“...Who was it, Fletch?”

His gaze searched Fletcher’s blue eyes, not demanding but insistent.

“I... I don’t know his name... He was a hyena... a bit athletic... He said he’s in my history class...”

Chester’s brows knitted together, his green eyes narrowing as recognition sparked. He remembered the hyena from his own department—tall, athletic build, second-year, usually keeping to himself. The image clicked into place.

“...Adam. Adam Lee.”

His voice was tight, almost growled under his breath. He squeezed Fletcher’s paw carefully, careful not to touch the cut, but his other paw fisted against his knee. His tail was stiff, the tension radiating off him.

“He hurt you, Fletch. That’s not something I can just let slide.”

Fletcher shook his head quickly, his ears flattening as he clutched his paw closer. His voice came soft, almost pleading.

“Chester, no... I don’t think Adam meant to hurt me...”

Chester’s green eyes flashed, his jaw tightening. For a moment, the fire in him was ready to ignite—but when he looked at Fletcher’s trembling blue eyes, the edge softened, just slightly. He exhaled, running a paw back through his golden fur.

“Maybe he didn’t mean to. But he *did*, Fletch. And that’s what matters to me.”

Fletcher lowered his gaze, his blue eyes soft and troubled. His voice was quiet, almost hesitant, but laced with compassion.

“Maybe... we can help him... Maybe we can talk to him...”

Chester stiffened at first, his green eyes flashing with disbelief. He leaned back slightly, running a paw over his muzzle, his tail swishing once in agitation.

“Fletch, he hurt you. Even if it wasn’t on purpose, he lashed out. I can’t just... forgive that, not when it’s you who got hurt.”

But then he looked back at Fletcher, at the earnest softness in his blue eyes, at the way his paw trembled slightly as he held it close. Chester exhaled slowly, his shoulders easing just a little. His voice softened, though the edge didn’t vanish entirely.

“You really think there’s something in him worth reaching? After what he did?”

He studied Fletcher’s face carefully, searching for the conviction behind those words.

“Yes... I want to talk to him.”

Fletcher looked up at Chester, his blue eyes steady despite the faint tremble in his voice.

The words hung in the air, quiet but firm.

Chester’s green eyes narrowed. He opened his mouth to argue—then stopped, sighing instead. His paw rubbed the back of his neck, tail flicking once before stilling.

“...You’re too good for your own good, Fletch.”

He leaned closer, cupping Fletcher’s uninjured paw with careful warmth. His voice softened, carrying that fire but tempered now with affection.

“If talking to him is what you really want... then I’ll be there with

you. Always.”

His green eyes held Fletcher’s, steady and unwavering, as though making a vow right there in the quiet dorm room.

“Thank you, Chester...”

Fletcher’s ears perked slightly, a soft smile breaking through the tension.

He squeezed Chester’s paw gently, blue eyes glimmering with gratitude. Then, after a beat, his voice grew cautious, tentative.

“Do you know where he lives?”

Chester exhaled slowly, his green eyes searching Fletcher’s face. He nodded once, reluctant but certain.

“Yeah... he’s in the dorm, too. Room 501. I’ve seen him around. Never talked to him much. He’s always kept to himself.”

He paused, thumb brushing lightly over the fur on Fletcher’s wrist, careful to avoid the cut.

“If you’re set on this, we’ll go together. But not tonight. You’ve had enough for one day.”

Chester added, his voice soft but firm now.

“Okay. We’ll go see Adam tomorrow morning, together.”

Fletcher nodded softly, the tension in his shoulders easing just a little.

Chester studied him for a long moment, green eyes filled with both worry and pride. Then he leaned forward, resting his forehead gently against Fletcher’s for a heartbeat, his voice low and warm.

“Alright. Tomorrow. Now let’s go take a rest, Fletch.”

He pulled back just enough to meet Fletcher’s blue eyes again, his

paw still wrapped carefully around Fletcher's uninjured one. His protective aura didn't fade, but there was a quiet acceptance in it now—a willingness to follow Fletcher's heart, even when it worried him.

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The morning air filtered in through the tall dorm windows, pale sunlight cutting across the corridor. The sounds of doors opening and closing echoed faintly—students heading for breakfast, voices blending into the usual campus morning hum.

Fletcher and Chester stood side by side in front of Room 501. Fletcher's paw hovered just above the door, his ears flicking nervously. His blue eyes were steady, but his tail betrayed a nervous flick.

Chester crossed his arms over his chest. His tail was still, his voice low but steady.

"You're sure about this, Fletch? We don't have to do it today if you're not ready."

Fletcher took a breath, steadyng himself. Then, with his injured paw tucked protectively close, he lifted the other and knocked softly on the door to Room 501. The sound echoed faintly in the corridor, sharp against the morning hush.

For a moment, there was no response. Just silence behind the door.

Then—a muffled rustle, the creak of floorboards, and the metallic *click* of the lock turning.

The door opened halfway, and Adam stood there. His brown eyes were shadowed, his expression unreadable. He looked like he hadn't slept well—fur slightly mussed, dark circles beneath his eyes.

The silence stretched, thick and awkward, until Adam's gaze flicked from Fletcher... to Chester standing beside him. His jaw tightened, his voice low and rough.

“...What do you want?”

His tone wasn't hostile, but guarded—brittle, as though bracing himself for a blow.

“Hi... You're Adam, right?”

Fletcher offered a small, tentative smile, his ears twitching nervously.

Adam's brown eyes flickered, narrowing slightly. His jaw worked for a moment before he gave a single, curt nod.

“...Yeah. That's me.”

He leaned a shoulder against the doorframe, crossing his arms, his posture closed off but not outright hostile. His gaze lingered on Fletcher for a beat longer than necessary, then shifted warily to Chester standing tall beside him.

Chester folded his arms across his chest, his green eyes sharp but steady, not moving away from Adam's. The retriever's tail flicked once, his stance protective, radiating quiet tension.

The three stood in silence for a moment, the air heavy with yesterday's shadow.

“...What are you doing here?” said Adam.

Fletcher shifted his weight, his blue eyes soft but steady despite

the nerves fluttering in his chest.

“I just wanted to... talk to you.”

The words hung in the hallway’s still air.

Adam stiffened. His brown eyes narrowed, his jaw tightening as if to push back. He glanced down at Fletcher’s paw—the faint red line still visible against the gray-white fur. His throat worked as he swallowed, then he muttered, rough and uneven.

“...Not sure that’s a good idea.”

Adam looked back up, and for a heartbeat, his guarded expression cracked—something raw flickering in his gaze, shame and conflict barely hidden.

Fletcher inhaled shallowly, voice small but steady as the morning light cut through the corridor.

“I... just want to understand you, Adam. Get to know you...”

There was a beat of silence that stretched long enough for the old radiators to creak.

Adam’s whole posture shifted. For the first time, the fury was edged with something like bewilderment and—briefly—hurt. His voice came out rough and oddly small.

“Understand me? Why would you—why would *you* want to know me?”

He took a half-step back, as if distance might steady him. The question was not a challenge so much as a plea that he didn’t fully trust himself to voice.

For a flicker of a second, Adam’s expression was all conflict—something like shame sliding beneath the surface anger. He exhaled,

a sound full of whatever he had been holding in. He looked at Fletcher again, his blue eyes steady. And this time, there was a crack of something softer.

“If you really want to... come in. But don’t expect miracles.”

The door creaked wider as Adam stepped aside, shoulders tense as if the simple act of letting them in cost him dearly.

Fletcher walked cautiously into the room, ears perked but body language gentle, almost deferential. Chester followed close behind, his green eyes sweeping the space once.

The room itself was sparse but neat—a few football posters pinned above the desk, textbooks stacked in careful towers, a pair of cleats shoved under the bed. The blinds were drawn halfway, muting the morning sunlight into gray bands across the carpet. It felt less like a living space, more like a shelter—walls built tight to keep the world out.

Adam shut the door quietly, leaning against it as though bracing himself. His brown eyes flicked between the two of them before settling on Fletcher. His voice came rough, hesitant.

“...So. You wanted to talk. Go ahead.”

Adam’s gaze narrowed, but when it returned to Fletcher, there was no hostility—only the barest trace of confusion, like he couldn’t understand why the husky was standing there at all.

“...How are you doing, Adam?”

Fletcher shifted on his feet, his ears tilting forward, blue eyes soft. His voice carried no edge, only quiet concern.

Adam blinked, clearly caught off guard. He looked away, jaw

working.

“...Why do you care?”

The words came out harsher than intended, but the tension in his shoulders betrayed the unease underneath.

Chester took half a step closer to Fletcher, his green eyes sharp, but he didn’t speak yet.

“...Nobody asks me that.”

Adam swallowed, shifting his weight. His voice dipped again, quieter, almost uncertain.

Fletcher steadied his breath, his tail brushing lightly against Chester’s leg for courage. His blue eyes met Adam’s brown ones, soft but unwavering.

“Because I want to understand you...”

Adam flinched like he’d been struck—not in pain, but in disbelief.

“...You don’t. Nobody does.”

Finally, Adam’s eyes flicked back to Fletcher, raw and conflicted, the wall in him cracking.

“...You really think you can?”

The room felt charged now, Adam teetering on the edge between shutting down and letting something spill out.

“I want to try, Adam... if you’ll let me.”

Fletcher took a careful step forward, his voice low but steady, carrying both hesitation and resolve.

Adam looked torn, caught between instinct and the faintest flicker of hope he didn’t seem to know how to handle.

“...You don’t know what you’re asking,” said Adam, but there’s

no venom in it—only exhaustion. He looked at Fletcher, really looked at him, and his guard faltered for a breath.

“...But maybe... maybe you mean it.”

“Will you let me try, then?”

Fletcher’s words hung in the dim room like a fragile thread.

Adam exhaled sharply through his nose, pacing a single step back before stopping himself. His shoulders rose and fell with the weight of an answer he didn’t want to give. He looked at Fletcher, at the faint scar on his paw, at the softness in his eyes despite it.

“...I don’t know if I can let anyone. But...”

He swallowed hard, his tail twitching once.

“...I don’t want to push you away again.”

Fletcher nodded gently, his ears flicking forward, voice steady but soft.

“Then... let’s just start small. Talking. That’s all.”

The simplicity of the words filled the room, cutting through the heaviness.

Adam leaned back against the wall. But his posture loosened, just a fraction, as though the husky’s calm persistence was harder to fight than he wanted to admit.

“...Talking. Right.”

He dragged a paw over his face, exhaling sharply, the sound tired rather than hostile.

“...What do you even want to know?”

“Are you... really okay?”

Fletcher asked again. The question hung heavy, not prying, not

accusing—just honest.

Adam stiffened. His brown eyes darted toward Fletcher, then away to the drawn blinds.

“...No. Not really.”

The admission was blunt, stripped of any mask. His arms uncrossed, paws falling uselessly at his sides. His tail gave a restless flick, and for a moment, he looked younger—less like the broad-shouldered athlete and more like someone cornered by his own thoughts.

“...I don’t know how you do it. How you... look so at ease. I feel like I’m at war with myself every day.”

The last words came out cracked, as though pulled against his will.

“You feel like... you’re at war with yourself?”

Fletcher leaned forward slightly in his chair, his blue eyes searching Adam’s face with quiet empathy. His voice was soft, almost hesitant, but steady.

Adam froze at the words, his chest rising sharply. His jaw tightened, and he swallowed hard, the silence stretching before he forced out a reply.

“...Yeah. Every damn day.”

He rubbed the back of his neck with a paw, restless, as if the admission itself burned.

“One part of me wants something... wants *someone*. The other part tells me I’m sick for it. Weak. Wrong.”

His words faltered, the weight in them dragging his shoulders

down.

“...It’s tearing me apart, Fletcher.”

“It’s okay, Adam... You’re not wrong, or sick... for wanting someone.”

Fletcher’s voice trembled faintly, but his blue eyes were unwavering, full of soft conviction. His words fell into the still room like a stone into deep water, rippling outward.

Adam went rigid. His brown eyes snapped to Fletcher, raw and startled, as if no one had ever said those words to him before. His throat worked, struggling to swallow, his voice hoarse, almost whispering.

“...Don’t say that.”

But Adam’s plea didn’t hold anger—it trembled with fear.

“...If I believe you... then everything I’ve been telling myself, everything I’ve been taught... it all falls apart.”

His eyes shined faintly in the gray morning light.

“You don’t have to face it alone...”

Fletcher’s ears folded back as he leaned forward, his voice tender, carrying a quiet strength. His words settled into the silence like a soft blanket.

Adam stiffened. His paws clenched at his sides, trembling faintly—though whether from anger, fear, or the effort of holding himself together, even he didn’t seem to know.

“...Why would you even say that? You don’t owe me anything. Not after what I—”

He cut himself off, his gaze flicking to Fletcher’s paw, the scar still

faintly visible. Shame pulled his eyes back down to the carpet. His voice lowered to a whisper.

“...Especially not after that.”

“We all deserve a chance at happiness, right?”

Fletcher’s words hung in the air, gentle but firm, a truth laid bare.

For a moment, he looked almost stricken, like Fletcher had spoken something Adam had long buried away. His jaw worked, but no words came at first, just raw conflict flickering across his face.

“...I don’t know if I do.”

The admission came out cracked, filled with years of doubt and pain.

“What makes you think you don’t?”

Fletcher lowered his voice into something tender, almost coaxing, his blue eyes soft but unwavering.

The room went still. And for a long moment, Adam didn’t answer. His brown eyes darted to the blinds, to the floor, anywhere but Fletcher’s face. His breath came heavy, uneven. Finally, his voice scraped out, bitter.

“...Because every time I even think about it, I hear his voice in my head. Telling me I’m wrong. Telling me if I ever...”

He stopped himself abruptly, his throat working. His fists clenched in his pockets, trembling.

“...Telling me I’d lose everything.”

The words hung broken in the air, heavy with unspoken history. His tail flicked once, sharp, before going still. He still wouldn’t look at Fletcher—but the crack in his armor was wide open now.

“Whose voice, Adam?”

Fletcher’s question landed softly, but it struck deep.

Adam stiffened immediately, his breath catching in his throat. His brown eyes flashed to Fletcher’s, then away, panic flickering across his features.

“...My dad’s.”

The syllables hung in the air like a curse. He muttered bitterly, almost to himself.

“...He never even asked me. He just... said it. Over and over. Like he knew. Like he was warning me.”

His voice cracked, his fists trembling as though he were fighting not to break down right there.

“That must have hurt so much... I’m so sorry...”

Fletcher lowered his voice, ears angling back, every word carrying quiet sincerity.

Adam jerked his head slightly, as if to brush it off, but the fight didn’t last. His brown eyes glistened. He turned away, paw dragging over his face, but his voice betrayed him.

“...I told myself it didn’t matter. That if I just kept my head down, worked harder, ran faster, hit harder on the field... maybe I could drown it out.”

He exhaled sharply, shaking his head, shoulders heavy. His voice dropped, hoarse and breaking at the edges.

“...But it never went away. His voice never left.”

Fletcher didn’t speak. Instead, tears slipped down his gray-and-white fur, his blue eyes glistening with quiet pain for Adam. With a

trembling breath, he slowly extended his paw, palm open, giving Adam the choice—not forcing, just offering.

The silence grew thick, heavy with the sound of breathing and the faint ticking of the dorm's wall clock.

Adam stared at Fletcher's paw, frozen. His fists clenched once more in his pockets, his whole frame trembling with the battle inside him. His brown eyes glistened, the raw ache in them unguarded now. For a long, painful moment, he didn't move.

Then, slowly, almost like he was afraid the ground would shatter beneath him, he pulled one paw free. His fingers hovered, hesitant, shaking—and at last, they brushed against Fletcher's.

It wasn't a grip. Not yet. Just contact. The barest acknowledgment.

After a long, fragile minute, Fletcher broke the silence.

“Thank you... for reaching out...”

Adam's breath hitched. His paw twitched faintly against Fletcher's, as if ready to pull away—but he didn't. His brown eyes lifted, conflicted and wet, locking on Fletcher's face.

“...Don't thank me. I... I don't deserve it.”

His voice shook, but the paw remained there, lingering in Fletcher's, as though some deeper part of him were desperate to believe otherwise. His frame trembled, like he was fighting back years of walls.

“I said we all deserve a chance at happiness, right? You reaching out, that's a start...”

Fletcher's voice was soft, his tears catching the morning light as

he gave Adam's paw the faintest, encouraging squeeze. His words landed gently, but they carried a weight that cut through the air like sunlight breaking cloud.

“...A start...”

Adam's paw trembled, but he left it in Fletcher's, clinging to the fragile thread between them. He swallowed hard, blinking rapidly, as though the words both terrified and steadied him at once. His gaze fell again, but this time, not out of shame—more like he was holding onto something too big to face head-on.

“Yes... a start... and you will have a happy ending, too...”

Fletcher's tears clung to his fur. His words were soft, but they echoed in the stillness of the room, carrying a weight that felt almost impossible to deny.

Adam froze at first, his brown eyes widening as if struck by something too bright. For a long, fragile moment, he couldn't speak. Then, voice cracking, he whispered.

“...You really believe that? That I... could have one?”

The question was almost childlike, trembling with fear and hope tangled together.

“Yes... yes, I do.”

Fletcher didn't hesitate. His paw stayed steady in Adam's trembling grip, his voice quiet but resolute. Adam's brown eyes widened, glassy with disbelief, searching Fletcher's face for even the faintest crack in his sincerity. Finding none, his body shuddered as if something inside him was breaking loose—the weight of years pressing down, and for the first time, lifting just a little.

“...Then maybe... maybe I can try.”

The words trembled with uncertainty, but they were spoken. A step, however small, into the light Fletcher had offered.

Chester’s green eyes softened. His paw at Fletcher’s back lingered, grounding him. He was proud of Fletcher. And his gaze on Adam held a flicker of reluctant respect—acknowledgment that Adam was trying.

The three stood there, bound by silence and a fragile new thread of trust. The morning outside pressed on, but inside Room 501, something had shifted.





Being Seen



The campus was alive tonight—lanterns strung between trees cast warm light across the green, paper ones swaying gently in the cool spring breeze. Food stalls lined the walkways: sizzling skewers, cotton candy, fried dumplings. Music drifted from a makeshift stage where students performed in turns. The hum of laughter and chatter filled the air, festive but intimate.

Fletcher and Chester moved through the crowd, shoulders brushing, occasionally bumping paws. Fletcher's blue eyes glinted in the lantern light, shy but bright, while Chester's green eyes held their usual playful spark.

For a brief moment, Fletcher let his paw slip into Chester's. The warmth was electric—risky here, among classmates—but it lingered just long enough to feel real. Chester smirked, leaning closer.

“Careful now, Fletch... we’re being scandalous.”

Fletcher blushed, ears twitching as he glanced around nervously. But the corner of his mouth curved upward, betraying a shy smile.

The two weaved through the festival, passing students tossing darts at balloon stands, couples sharing candied fruit, and groups sprawled on the grass enjoying fried chicken boxes. The night felt alive, but for Fletcher and Chester, it was a bubble—testing the waters of being seen, not just hiding away in quiet corners.

Chester bought them both taiyaki pastries from a stall, handing Fletcher one with a grin.

“Sweet enough for you, or do I need to feed it to you to make a scene?”

Fletcher nearly choked on a laugh, nudging him in mock protest, tail flicking with shy affection.

They wandered toward the lake at the edge of campus, where lanterns floated on the water, glowing softly like stars that had descended just for the night. Groups of students sat nearby, tossing stones into the ripples, whispering, laughing. The air was thick with spring warmth and possibility, and for a while, Fletcher and Chester could just *be*—not in hiding, not entirely out either, but somewhere in between.

Fletcher picked up a smooth, flat stone from the lakeshore, his blue eyes shining in the glow. He weighed it in his paw, crouched low, and flicked it across the water. The stone skipped twice—then plunked under with a splash. Fletcher laughed softly, his ears flicking back in mock embarrassment.

Chester smirked, stepping beside him. His green eyes glinted

mischievously as he selected his own stone.

“Watch and learn, Fletch.”

He wound up with an exaggerated arm swing, sending the stone darting low across the lake. It skipped six times before sinking. Chester puffed his chest playfully, shooting Fletcher a mock-proud look.

“Okay... fine, you win this round.”

But then Fletcher stooped for another stone, determined, his tail swishing as he lined up again. This one skipped four times before vanishing—a small triumph. His face lit up, and without thinking, he bumped shoulders with Chester, laughing.

“Not bad, scandalous husky.”

Around them, couples and friends were clustered along the lakeshore, tossing stones, taking selfies, or simply watching lanterns drift. Music from the festival stage faintly carried across the water, but here it was quieter—more intimate.

As Fletcher stooped for more stones, he saw Ian walking slowly along the paved path on the opposite bank. His indigo fur looked muted under the lantern light, his yellow eyes downcast. Where others laughed, took photos, and chattered, Ian moved with quiet steps, paws tucked in his coat pockets. Even in the middle of the festival’s energy, he seemed apart from it—like the music and lights were happening around him, not for him.

Fletcher noticed first, his ears perking, eyes following Ian’s figure in the distance. His smile faded slightly, replaced by a soft crease of concern. Chester followed his gaze, green eyes narrowing

thoughtfully as he recognized Ian.

“He looks lonely...”

Fletcher’s voice dropped, barely louder than the water lapping at the shore. His blue eyes lingered on the distant figure of Ian walking under the lantern glow.

“Yeah... he does.”

The two stood side by side, watching Ian’s solitary pace cut through the festival crowd, the glow of lanterns painting him in gold and shadow. Around them, the festival felt distant—a hum of joy against the quiet ache of someone walking alone.

“Maybe we should go talk to him...”

Fletcher watched Ian’s solitary figure move under the glow of lanterns, his ears angling forward with quiet worry. Chester glanced down at Fletcher. For a beat, he studied Fletcher’s expression—the kindness there, the unshakable pull toward someone else’s pain. Chester exhaled, a small smile tugging at his mouth despite the heaviness of the moment.

“Of course you’d say that. That’s my Fletch.”

He bumped his shoulder gently against the husky’s, then nodded toward the path that circled the lake.

“Alright. Let’s go.”

Together, they left the shore, weaving through clusters of festival-goers, their steps falling into rhythm as they made their way around the lake toward Ian’s path. The music and laughter faded into the background as the lanterns guided their way forward, toward the quiet figure of the cat walking alone.



The lanterns rippled their glow across the water, laughter from the festival faint behind them. Ian walked with slow steps, his indigo fur catching glimmers of light, yellow eyes distant.

Fletcher and Chester closed the distance, their pace cautious but steady. When they were close enough, Fletcher lifted his voice gently, careful not to startle Ian.

“Hey... Ian.”

Ian turned, surprise flickering in his eyes. For a heartbeat, his expression was guarded, almost as if he’d been caught somewhere private, even though he was out in the open. His yellow eyes flicked from Fletcher to Chester, then back.

“Oh... Fletcher, Chester. You’re here too.”

But even with the curve of a smile, the sadness didn’t leave his eyes. His paws stayed buried in his coat pockets, his posture tight, as though the weight he carried clung too closely to shake off—even on a festival night.

“Yeah. We were skipping stones. You looked like you could use some company.”

Chester crossed his arms lightly, tilting his head with casual ease. His words were blunt, but not unkind.

Ian blinked at that, his polite smile faltering. He looked away toward the water, lantern reflections dancing in his eyes.

Then, Ian let out a faint, almost embarrassed chuckle, his gaze lingering on the lantern-lit ripples of the lake.

“I... don’t know how to skip stones. Never done that in my entire life.”

The admission was simple, but it hung heavier than it should have. His tail swayed slowly, betraying unease.

Fletcher tilted his head, blue eyes softening as he caught the weight beneath Ian’s words. His ears flicked forward.

Chester raised a brow, folding his arms. His voice was lighter, almost teasing, though there was a gentleness beneath it, trying to lighten the mood.

“Well, lucky for you... you’ve got two stone-skipping professionals right here.”

Ian let out a small, genuine laugh at that, but it faded quickly, replaced with that faint, guarded look again. His paws tightened in his pockets, his shoulders still tense.

Fletcher hesitated, then took a small step closer. His voice was soft, careful not to push.

“Wanna take a walk? Or... maybe sit down somewhere? On a bench?”

Ian blinked at Fletcher, surprise flickering in his yellow eyes. For a moment, he looked like he might refuse—his tail swayed once, uneasily. But then he exhaled slowly, the tension in his shoulders loosening just a fraction.

“...A bench sounds good.”

Chester nodded, gesturing toward an empty bench tucked a little further down the lakeside path, where the lantern light glowed softer and the noise of the festival was more distant.

“Alright then. Let’s sit.”

The three of them walked in silence for a few steps, the gravel crunching softly, lanterns reflecting on the dark water beside them. They settled onto the wooden bench—Fletcher and Chester side by side, Ian sitting carefully at the other end, his paws still tucked into his coat pockets.

The night air felt cooler here, quieter. The festival hum was distant, leaving space for words that didn’t come easily. Ian stared out at the floating lanterns, his ears tilted back slightly, as though he was both present and somewhere else entirely.

Fletcher leaned forward a little, his voice soft, tentative but warm.

“How are you enjoying the festival, Ian?”

Ian didn’t answer right away. His yellow eyes stayed fixed on the lanterns drifting on the lake, his posture neat but too still—as if even sitting here felt rehearsed. Finally, he let out a breath that sounded more like a sigh.

“...I wouldn’t really know. It’s my first one.”

His words hung in the air, casual on the surface, but there was a weight beneath them—something unspoken, something that made his tail flick once before curling tightly around himself.

Chester tilted his head, brows furrowing slightly.

“First one? As in... first festival at Northbridge?”

Ian shook his head, the faint smile fading, his gaze dropping to his paws.

“No. First... ever.”

He didn’t elaborate, but the silence that followed felt thick.

“You’ve... never been to one, ever?”

Fletcher leaned in slightly, his blue eyes wide with quiet concern.

Ian shifted on the bench, his ears dipping back. He didn’t quite meet Fletcher’s gaze, instead tracing the glow of a lantern’s reflection across the lake. His voice was calm, but edged with something brittle.

“...My parents never allowed it. Said festivals were... distractions. That my time was better spent practicing, studying.”

He swallowed, his paw tightening briefly in his coat pocket. His tail curled tighter around his leg.

“So... I don’t really know how to... act in one. How to... enjoy it.”

The honesty slipped out raw, heavier than he had meant, and he quickly added with a forced chuckle.

“But I suppose sitting on a bench by the water counts, doesn’t it?”

The lantern light flickered across Ian’s fur, highlighting the sharp contrast between the calm mask on his face and the loneliness in his eyes.

“It does... Ian. But... you deserve more than that...”

Fletcher’s voice was quiet, careful, but carrying warmth as his blue eyes lingered on Ian’s profile.

Ian stiffened slightly at the words, his ears twitching. For a moment, he looked like he might have brushed it off with another polite smile—but something in Fletcher’s tone made him pause. His gaze drifted back to the water, and this time his voice was almost a whisper.

“...Do I?”

The question wasn’t rhetorical; it was raw.

Chester leaned back against the bench, his voice lower, more grounded, steady where Ian’s felt fragile.

“Of course you do. Everyone does.”

Ian let out a breath—not quite relief, not quite agreement—and curled his paws together in his lap, as though unsure what to do with them.

“...I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

Fletcher’s tail flicked once as he leaned forward.

“How about... we start small? You said you don’t know how to skip stones. Why don’t we start with that?”

Ian blinked, his yellow eyes snapping toward Fletcher, surprised. His ears tilted back, and a faint, nervous chuckle escaped him.

“...Here? Now?”

Chester smirked, pushing off the bench with an easy stretch. His green eyes glinted as he glanced at Ian.

“Why not? The lake’s right there, and the lanterns make for a pretty dramatic stage. Perfect for a first lesson.”

Ian hesitated, glancing between them. His paw tightened around the edge of the bench, shoulders tense. The idea seemed to stir both apprehension and something else—a quiet, reluctant spark. Finally, he exhaled, standing slowly, his tail twitching once.

“...Alright. Show me.”

The three stepped off the bench toward the lake’s edge, lanterns glowing like fireflies above their reflections. The festival noise

hummed faintly in the distance, but here it felt quieter, the rippling water waiting.

The gravel crunched as Fletcher bent near the water's edge, lantern light shimmering across his gray-and-white fur. He picked up a flat stone and held it carefully between his paw pads, turning to Ian with a gentle smile.

"See? You want it flat, like this. Hold it low... then flick your wrist, almost sideways. Like you're brushing the surface."

He pulled back, took a breath, and with a smooth motion, sent the stone gliding. It skipped—once, twice, three times—before sinking into the dark lake with a *plunk*. Fletcher's tail wagged faintly, his blue eyes lighting up as he glanced back at Ian.

"Like that. Nothing fancy. Just a little wrist."

Ian watched, ears tilted forward, his yellow eyes catching both the lanterns and the small circles fading into ripples. There was awe there, quiet and fragile—like watching something impossibly simple and yet impossibly out of reach. His paw hesitated near the ground, not quite picking up a stone yet.

Chester crouched beside them, scooping up his own stone with practiced ease. His tone was lighter, playful, trying to ease the heaviness.

"And if you're me, you go for bragging rights. Watch this."

He flung his stone, a smooth arc—skip, skip, skip, skip, skip—five clean jumps before sinking. He grinned back at Ian, wagging his tail.

"See? Professional."

Ian chuckled under his breath, shaking his head. But his paw

finally closed around a stone, awkward, stiff. He glanced toward Fletcher almost instinctively, like a student looking at his teacher.

Fletcher stepped closer, his blue eyes warm and steady. He crouched beside Ian, picking up a small, smooth stone and holding it in his paw.

“Okay, you grab it like this...”

He placed the stone into Ian’s paw, then lightly adjusted Ian’s fingers, carefully guiding them into position.

“...And you move like this. Low, almost brushing the water. Then, just a quick flick of the wrist.”

Ian stayed still, his ears angled back as Fletcher’s paw steadied his. His yellow eyes dropped to the stone in his grip, then flicked briefly toward Fletcher—a glance full of something unspoken: gratitude, awkwardness, longing, maybe all at once.

Chester watched the two of them, his arms crossed. His green eyes, full of quiet pride in Fletcher’s tenderness. He tilted his muzzle upward with a half-smile, adding a touch of playfulness to ease the tension.

“Alright, rookie. You’re in good paws. Just don’t throw it straight down, unless you want a really loud splash.”

Ian chuckled softly before drawing in a breath. With Fletcher’s gentle guidance lingering in his movements, he pulled back his arm and let the stone fly.

The stone arced... skipped once, skipped twice, then disappeared with a splash.

“...I did it.”

Ian's eyes widened, his tail flicking in surprise.

"Hey! You did it! Even skipped twice! Better than my first time."

Fletcher's blue eyes lit up, his tail swishing as he beamed at Ian.

Ian froze for a second, caught off guard by Fletcher's enthusiasm.

Then, slowly, the corners of his mouth lifted into something rare: a real, unguarded smile. His ears perked slightly, and the tension in his shoulders eased.

"...Better than your first, huh? Guess I had a good teacher," said Ian, almost playfully.

Chester smirked, wagging his tail as he grabbed another stone, tossing it expertly so it hopped four times before vanishing.

"Careful, Ian. If you get too good too fast, you might put us out of business."

Ian chuckled—a soft, genuine sound that seemed to surprise even him. The lanterns shimmered across the lake as ripples spread from his stone, and for a brief moment, the loneliness he had carried felt lighter.



The three returned to the bench. Fletcher and Chester sat close together, while Ian lowered himself at the end again—but this time, there was less distance in his posture.

For a while, silence lingered between them, broken only by the faint festival music drifting over the trees and the ripple of the lake. Then Ian exhaled slowly, his yellow eyes fixed on the water, though

his voice carried toward them.

“...My parents never really let me do much. Festivals, games, friends... all of it was... unnecessary. A distraction.”

His tail curled tighter around his legs. He rubbed his thumb across his paw, fidgeting slightly.

“I was supposed to focus. On music. On being... their perfect son. The prodigy.”

He laughed once, hollow.

“And I did. I practiced, I performed, I studied. I became everything they wanted. But... I never learned how to just... *be*.”

His yellow eyes flicked toward Fletcher and Chester, lonely in the lantern light.

“Even tonight, I don’t know what I’m supposed to do. How to enjoy it. How to act like... a normal student.”

He swallowed, shoulders stiffening as though ashamed of saying too much.

“But Ian, you were being... you, when we were having dinner together, remember? When you had that spaghetti. You were just... Ian back then.”

Fletcher leaned forward, his voice soft but certain, steady.

Ian blinked, caught off guard. His yellow eyes widened slightly, then darted away, searching the dark water as though it might have held an answer. His tail twitched, betraying the impact of Fletcher’s words.

“...Just Ian?”

Chester shifted closer, resting his arm along the back of the bench,

his green eyes softer than usual.

“He’s right. You weren’t performing, you weren’t proving anything. You were just sitting with us. Talking. Eating. Laughing.”

Ian lowered his gaze, his paw tightening faintly on the bench. For a moment, he didn’t speak—but the fragile smile tugging at the corner of his mouth betrayed something breaking through the loneliness.

“...I don’t know if anyone’s ever thought of me like that. Just... me.”

The lanterns swayed above, casting shifting light across their faces, as if even the night itself was holding its breath around Ian’s words.

“You talked about your mom’s cooking... lasagna. You just sounded... normal. That’s just you, Ian.”

Ian’s ears twitch at Fletcher’s soft words, his yellow eyes widening a little at the memory. For a moment, he looks almost embarrassed.

“...That was the one time she... cooked without it being for a recital, or for guests, or to celebrate an award. Just... us. Just dinner.”

He smiled faintly, his tail curling tighter.

“I guess... that’s why I liked it. It wasn’t about proving anything. It was just... me. Sitting at the table. Eating lasagna. Existing.”

The words landed heavier than he meant, his voice catching slightly at the end before he cleared his throat, trying to smooth it over. But the crack lingered, raw and undeniable.

Chester glanced at Fletcher and Ian, his expression softening even

further. His voice was steady and low.

“And that’s enough. You’re enough, Ian.”

Ian’s eyes flicked between them, searching, unsettled by the sincerity—as if no one had ever told him that before without strings attached.

Fletcher leaned in slightly, his blue eyes steady and soft. His voice carried a quiet conviction, like he wanted each word to reach Ian and stay with him.

“Yes, Ian. To us, you’re just... Ian. Ian Taylor.”

The name lingered in the air, unadorned by titles, not weighed down by expectations. Just him.

Ian froze, his yellow eyes widening a fraction. His breath caught, and for a moment, he couldn’t meet Fletcher’s gaze. His ears dipped, his paw tightening around the edge of the bench as though grounding himself. Then slowly, he exhaled, a sound almost shaky.

“...Just Ian Taylor.”

He repeated it like it was foreign, like he was testing the shape of something he was never allowed himself to believe. His chest rose and fell once more before his lips curled into the faintest, most sincere smile.



Being Enough



The spring sun poured across the campus. Students sprawled on picnic blankets or tossed frisbees, laughter echoing faintly in the air.

Fletcher and Chester walked side by side along the paved path, their shoulders brushing lightly, the casual comfort of being together on a quiet weekend morning. Fletcher carried a book under his arm, while Chester's paws were tucked into his hoodie pockets.

Ahead, the steady *thunk-thunk* of a football hitting the ground drew their attention. On the far side of the yard, Adam practiced alone. His movements were sharp, deliberate, each throw and catch precise. His brown eyes narrowed in focus, his jaw set.

Sweat glistened against his short fur under the sunlight, muscles taut with each motion. The yard was full of voices and laughter, yet Adam stood apart, as if the field itself had walled him off from the others. Every throw looked less like play and more like a fight

against himself.

Chester slowed his pace, green eyes narrowing slightly.

“...That’s Adam, isn’t it?”

Fletcher followed Chester’s eyes, his chest tightening at the sight of Adam’s solitary intensity. The memory of their brief, painful encounter lingered—but so did the moment Adam’s paw had reached back for his, however clumsily.

Fletcher slowed his step. His voice was tentative but warm.

“Maybe we should go say hi? See how he’s doing...”

Chester glanced at Fletcher, studying his expression. A breath escaped him, half a sigh, half a laugh. His tail flicked once.

“You really can’t help yourself, can you?”

But the softness in his green eyes betrayed affection rather than scolding.

“Alright. Let’s go.”

Together they stepped off the path, crossing the grass toward Adam. Each *thunk* of the football grew louder as they neared. Adam snatched it from the air, pivoted, and fired it back downfield—though there was no one to catch it. His body moved with precision, but his face... his face looked like stone.

As Fletcher and Chester drew close enough, Adam finally noticed them. His brown eyes flicked over, brief and guarded, before narrowing slightly. He wiped his forearm across his brow, clutching the football at his side, his posture tightening like he was bracing himself.

“...What do you want?”

Fletcher stopped a few paces away. His voice was calm, careful not to press.

“Hey, Adam. We just wanted to say hi.”

Adam’s grip on the football tightened. For a moment, it seemed like he might have just turned away.

But instead, he exhaled sharply through his nose and shifted his weight, lowering the ball slightly. His voice remained flat, but there was a thread of uncertainty beneath.

“...Hi.”

Chester stepped forward half a stride, paws still in his hoodie pockets. His tone was steady, as if to lighten the mood.

“Training hard. Even on a weekend, huh?”

“Gotta stay sharp. Can’t fall behind.”

Adam’s words sounded rehearsed—an easy shield.

“How long have you been practicing today?”

Fletcher tilted his head slightly, taking a careful step closer.

Adam shifted the football in his paws, glancing away for a moment before answering.

“Since morning.”

“That’s a long time to be out here. You take breaks at all?”

Chester raised a brow, his tail flicking once. His voice was steady, not judgmental, but matter-of-fact.

“...Breaks make you soft.”

The words came out clipped, rehearsed again—like a mantra he’d repeated to himself too many times. His paw squeezed the football just a little tighter.

“You must’ve been practicing for hours by now. The sun’s blazing. Maybe you can just… cool down a little?”

Fletcher took another step closer, his ears tilted with concern.

Adam’s grip on the football faltered. His brown eyes flicked toward Fletcher, sharp at first, but there was hesitation there.

“…I don’t… cool down. Not really.”

The words came out rough, defensive—but weaker than before, like even he knew the armor was cracking. His ears twitched, betraying the conflict inside.

“Everyone cools down, Adam. Even pros. You’ll tear yourself apart if you don’t.”

Chester’s voice was calm but steady. Adam’s jaw tightened. He looked between them, torn—the football clutched like a shield, the sunlight pressing down.

“…I can’t afford to.”

“I promise. Let’s just take a walk around the campus. A few minutes with us. Then, we’ll be back here.”

Fletcher pressed on with a smile, his voice coaxing and persistent—as though he had no intention of letting Adam slip away so easily. Adam eyed him warily, regarding the offer as if it were some kind of trap. Despite his efforts to hold a stern expression, however, the longer he looked at Fletcher, the harder it became to keep his face rigid.

Finally, Adam exhaled in defeat.

“…Fine. Just a few minutes.”

The three of them started moving toward the shaded paths that

wound around the campus. The shift from the open sun to the filtered light under trees felt cooler, quieter.

“How have you been, Adam?”

Fletcher glanced sideways at the hyena walking just a step behind them. His voice was low, cautious but sincere. Adam’s ears twitched. His grip tightened on the football tucked under his arm. He kept his gaze forward, his stride even.

“...Fine.”

His tail flicked once behind him, betraying the truth underneath. Chester cast him a side glance, green eyes narrowing slightly. His tone stayed neutral, but there was a hint of firmness in it.

“Doesn’t sound fine.”

Adam bristled, his jaw tightening. For a second, it seemed like he might snap back. Instead, he exhaled slowly, the tension in his shoulders sagging just a fraction.

“...I’ve been... managing.”

The word hung awkwardly in the air, heavy with meaning left unsaid. His paw rubbed over the scuffed leather of the football, like it was the only thing tethering him.

“Managing... sounds like it’s been hard.”

Fletcher slowed his step just enough to glance at Adam. Adam’s ears twitched back at the words.

“...It is.”

The admission was short—but it landed heavy. His paw gripped the football tighter, knuckles pressing pale under his fur.

After a few steps, Adam continued. His voice was quieter this

time, strained.

“...Sometimes I feel like no matter what I do, it’s never enough. Not for the team. Not for my dad. Not even for me.”

The three walked under the shade, Adam’s words still lingering in the air, heavy. Fletcher kept quiet, his blue eyes steady, giving Adam the silence to breathe.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, Fletcher noticed the familiar brick façade of the music hall rising nearby, its tall windows catching the late-morning light. A memory stirred—Ian at the piano, his voice soft, telling them they were always welcome.

Fletcher slowed his pace and gestured gently toward the building.

“Adam, wanna make a quick detour? Music hall building. Should be cool in there and probably empty. So we can talk in private.”

Adam stiffened, glancing sideways at Fletcher with a guarded look. His brow furrowed, suspicion flickering in his brown eyes.

“...Why there?”

Chester stepped in smoothly.

“Because it’s quiet. No team, no professors, no one watching. Just us.”

Adam looked between them, clearly torn. His grip on the football tightened once more. Then, after a beat, he exhaled through his nose, sharp but resigned.

“...Fine. A few minutes.”



The heavy doors creaked open as Fletcher pushed gently, cool air spilling out to greet them. Inside, the wide lobby smelled faintly of polished wood and old sheet music.

Then—faint at first, muffled by distance and walls—the sound of a piano filtered through the building.

Adam stiffened immediately, his ears flicking toward the sound. He frowned, his paw tightening around the football like he was gripping onto the one thing that made sense.

“...Someone’s here.”

Chester lifted his chin, listening, his green eyes narrowing slightly. A small smile touched his muzzle.

“Sounds like Ian.”

Fletcher’s ears perked, a flicker of recognition lighting his face. His voice softened with quiet certainty.

“Yeah... it’s him.”

The melody swelled faintly as they moved toward the source—the main stage hall. Each note felt deliberate, weighted, carrying something unspoken beneath it.

Adam lingered behind for a moment, his brow furrowed, as though torn between curiosity and resistance. The music seemed to pull at something inside him, something he didn’t want to acknowledge.

“Let’s go. He won’t mind.”

Fletcher turned back, his blue eyes steady on Adam. His voice was soft, coaxing but sure, carrying a quiet confidence.

Adam’s ears flicked back, suspicion and unease flickering across

his face. His paw flexed against the football, as if weighing whether to hold it tighter or drop it entirely.

“...Fine.”

Chester gave a faint nod, his green eyes softening as he moved forward, leading them toward the main stage hall. Their footsteps echoed lightly against the polished floor, the piano’s melody growing clearer with every step. At the end of the lobby, Fletcher pushed open the tall door just enough to peek inside.

Ian sat at the grand piano. His yellow eyes were half-lidded, focused on the keys, his posture calm yet heavy with emotion. He hadn’t noticed Fletcher yet, his world consumed by the music flowing beneath his paws.

Fletcher led the way in quietly, Chester following close behind. Their footsteps were muffled by the thick carpet, the sound of the piano swallowing any intrusion. They slipped into the back row, sitting side by side, their presence small against the vast emptiness of the hall.

From the open doorway behind them, Adam hesitated, still half in the corridor. His brow furrowed, his grip on the football tightening as he listened. The music pulled at something in him, something buried—a yearning he didn’t want to name.

Fletcher glanced over his shoulder toward the doorway. There, in the dim spill of corridor light, Adam lingered. His brown eyes were fixed on the stage, conflicted—drawn in, yet resisting.

Fletcher raised a paw, subtle and soft, and gave a small, reassuring gesture. His blue eyes held Adam’s, steady and warm, silently telling

him: *It's okay. Come in.*

Adam froze for a heartbeat. The music swelled—a tender cascade from Ian's piano that seemed to press into the silence between them. Slowly, almost reluctantly, Adam stepped inside.

The door clicked softly shut behind him. His footsteps were careful, uncertain, but he crossed the carpeted aisle until he reached the back row, sliding into the seat beside Fletcher. His football rested stiffly on his lap, as though it were still a shield.

On stage, Ian didn't notice them, his world consumed in the music, his paws gliding over the keys with aching precision. His yellow eyes glimmered faintly in the stage lights, but they were distant, turned inward.

The final notes trailed off, echoing faintly across the vast hall before dissolving into silence. Ian's paws lingered on the keys, pressing gently as if reluctant to let go. His yellow eyes swept the empty seats—only they weren't empty.

In the back row, three figures sat quietly: Fletcher's blue eyes steady and kind, Chester's calm and attentive green eyes, and Adam's brown eyes, half-turned toward the stage.

“...You're here.”

Ian's voice carried, thin but clear, across the vast stillness. His tail flicked behind the piano bench, betraying the sudden shift in his composure.

“We didn't mean to interrupt... We just heard the music.”

Fletcher leaned forward slightly, his tone warm, reassuring.

Ian studied them from the stage, his gaze catching on Adam, the

unfamiliar presence among the familiar. His ears tipped slightly back, curious but cautious.

“...Then I suppose the music found you.”

The silence stretched, thick with the echo of the last note. Ian rested his paws lightly on the keys, golden eyes glinting in the stage light as they flicked between Fletcher, Chester... and then Adam, the unfamiliar hyena clutching his football like a lifeline. It was Fletcher who broke the silence.

“This is Adam. He’s... our friend.”

The word hung carefully in the air, not forced, but offered.

Adam shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He didn’t correct Fletcher, but his grip on the ball tightened. He didn’t meet Ian’s gaze.

Ian tilted his head slightly, studying Adam with quiet curiosity. No judgment, just observation—the same way he studied music, as though trying to hear the truth beneath the surface.

“...I see.”

He paused, then gestured subtly toward the stage with one paw.

“You came at the end. Do you want to hear more?”

Chester smiled faintly, his green eyes softening at the offer.

“We’d like that.”

But it was Adam who surprised himself—his ears twitched, and before he could stop it, the words slipped out, rough and unpolished.

“...Yeah.”

Adam’s eyes widened slightly, as if he hadn’t meant to say it aloud.

From the stage, Ian’s gaze lingered on Adam for a beat longer.

Then he turned back to the piano, laying his paws against the keys. And with a deep, deliberate breath, the music began again—as if meant for just the four of them.

The vast hall seemed to shrink around the sound. It was soft, intimate, a piece that spoke of quiet encounters and the unexpected tenderness of being seen. Each phrase lifted with a sweetness that lingered, as though the air itself hesitated to let the music go.

Fletcher's blue eyes widened faintly in recognition. He leaned forward, his voice barely above a whisper, not wanting to disturb the music.

“...I know this one.”

Chester tilted his head, listening closely, the corners of his muzzle softening. His green eyes flickered toward Fletcher, then back to the stage.

“It's... lighter than the last. Feels... different.”

Beside them, Adam sat stiffly, the football balanced in his lap. At first, his gaze was down, jaw tight as though resisting. But the melody kept flowing, tender and persistent, until his eyes lifted toward the stage. His ears twitched forward. His grip on the ball loosened, if only a fraction.

On stage, Ian didn't look at them. His eyes were lowered, lashes catching the stage light, his whole body moving gently with the music. It was as though this was the only language he knew to offer, and right now, he was speaking it just for them.

The last notes faded into the vast stillness of the hall, dissolving like light into dusk. Ian let his paws linger on the keys a moment

longer, as if reluctant to let the music go. Then, finally, he lifted them, the silence pressing gently around them all.

From the back row, Fletcher leaned forward, his blue eyes warm, his voice soft.

“That was Chopin, wasn’t it? Nocturne in E-flat Major.”

On stage, Ian’s yellow eyes flicked up, meeting Fletcher’s across the gulf of empty seats. A faint, almost imperceptible smile touched his muzzle.

“You know it.”

Ian nodded. Beside Fletcher, Chester watched the exchange, his green eyes thoughtful, a smile tugging faintly at his muzzle.

Adam sat stiffly, his ears tilted forward, caught between discomfort and something else—something fragile, stirred by the music.

“That was... actually very romantic.”

Fletcher leaned forward in his seat, his blue eyes warm and earnest, his voice gentle but certain.

On stage, Ian blinked, caught off guard. His yellow eyes widened faintly, and for a moment, a flush of color seemed to rise beneath the indigo fur of his cheeks.

“...It’s a love song, yes. But romance isn’t always mine to keep.”

The words hung in the silence, tinged with something he hadn’t meant to reveal.

The soft glow of stage light framed Ian’s bowed figure at the piano, his paws still resting on the keys as if they tethered him.

From the back row, Fletcher tilted his head slightly, asking

carefully.

“Why do you think so?”

On stage, Ian froze. His yellow eyes flicked up, startled, then darted away again, finding refuge in the black and white keys before him. His tail gave a restless flick against the bench.

“Because... for me, it’s always been written by someone else. Played for someone else. Expected of me, not chosen by me.”

His paws lifted, flexing faintly as though the music might have spilled again, but he stilled them. His shoulders tensed, his voice dropping to a near whisper.

“...It never feels like mine.”

Beside Fletcher, Adam stared hard at the stage, his brow furrowed. Something about Ian’s words lingered in him—*not mine... expected of me*—resonating uncomfortably deep. His grip on the football loosened further, resting limply against his lap.

“...I get that.”

From the back row, Adam finally spoke, the leather of the football squeaking softly under his paw. His ears were low, his gaze fixed on the stage but not quite on Ian—more on some far-off point that only he could see.

Ian’s ears twitched. His yellow eyes flicked up, truly seeing Adam for the first time.

“It’s like... when people decide for you what you’re supposed to be. How you’re supposed to live. And if you don’t fit that, you just... stop being you.”

Adam’s jaw tightened, a bitter half-laugh catching in his throat.

“...You start playing someone else’s part.”

The words hung in the air, raw and unpolished, but real. From the stage, Ian studied Adam—the guarded set of his shoulders, the way his voice trembled just slightly at the edges. And for the first time, Ian’s expression softened—not with pity, but recognition.

Neither of them spoke, but it was as though something delicate had begun to form—an unspoken thread between Ian and Adam, both of them finally seeing a little of themselves reflected in the other.

Fletcher shifted forward slightly, his blue eyes soft and searching. He looked toward Ian, who still sat poised at the piano, frozen between one breath and the next. The silence felt sacred—something to be handled with care.

“Ian, if you don’t mind... can I actually suggest something?”

Ian blinked, looking up, curious but wary.

“What is it?”

Fletcher hesitated, then smiled faintly, almost shyly.

“Can you play ‘Solveig’s Song?’”

The name alone shifted the air. Chester’s ears perked slightly, recognizing the title, while Adam glanced toward Fletcher, puzzled but attentive.

On stage, Ian’s paws hovered above the keys, a flicker of surprise crossing his face. His yellow eyes softened, the faintest glint of memory passing through them.

“...Grieg.”

He looked back at Fletcher—at the husky’s earnest eyes, the

gentle steadiness in his voice—and then down at the piano again. For a long moment, he said nothing. Then, with a slow nod, he set his paws on the keys.

“All right.”

He exhaled once, deep and steady, and began to play.

The melody that spilled out was different from the Chopin before—slower, aching, steeped in longing. It unfurled like a confession made in the language of the soul. Each note drifted into the air, tender and mournful, yet filled with a quiet kind of grace—the sound of waiting, of believing, of forgiving without words.

Adam sat motionless, his brown eyes locked on Ian. Something in the melody pierced through the walls he’d built.

Fletcher watched them both, his heart full, realizing—this is what connection sounded like. Not spoken, not forced. Just understood.

The melody continued to drift through the air like a lament carried on the wind. It was gentle but full of ache—the kind of song that felt as if it was waiting for someone who might never come.

On the stage, Ian played with his eyes closed, every note drawn out with deliberate care. His shoulders rose and fell slowly, as though each breath was tied to the rhythm.

Fletcher sat completely still, blue eyes glistening faintly under the soft lights. Across the aisle, Chester leaned back, arms folded loosely, his usual confidence quieted by the haunting sound.

And then there was Adam. He stared at Ian, the football resting forgotten by his feet. His throat worked once, but no sound came. The music found the cracks in him—all the guilt, all the things he’d

never allowed himself to feel.

The final phrase hung in the air—a single, descending line that faded into silence. Ian’s paws rested gently on the keys, motionless.

No one spoke at first.

The hall felt suspended in that stillness.

“...That... hurts.”

Finally, Adam exhaled—a shaky, uneven breath.

“...It’s supposed to.”

Ian answered softly, without looking up.

Fletcher glanced between them—the hyena and the cat, both frozen in their own kind of pain, yet somehow, seen.

“But maybe that’s what makes it beautiful too.”

Ian looked up then, meeting Fletcher’s eyes and then Adam’s—and he smiled, faint but real.

♦

Fletcher rose from his seat in the back and gestured gently for the others to follow. They walked down the long central aisle, the soft pad of their footsteps mingling with the faint hum of the piano’s fading resonance. They took seats in the front row, just below the stage. The grand piano loomed above them, its lid open like a dark wing.

Ian sat quietly on the bench, tail curling around his legs, yellow eyes lowered toward the keys. His reflection shimmered faintly in the polished black surface of the instrument.

Chester sat beside Fletcher, who was in the middle. Adam took the far seat, still a little tense, his posture defensive, but the sharpness in his gaze had softened.

“Thank you... Ian. That was beautiful.”

Fletcher spoke out first—his voice soft, reverent, as though afraid to disturb what the music had left behind.

“...I haven’t played that one in years.”

“Why not? You play it like it’s part of you.”

Chester asked, tilting his head a little with curiosity. Ian answered half-smiling. Almost wistful.

“It is. But it’s also... everything I try to forget. Waiting for something that may never come back. Believing, even when you know better.”

The words drifted across the space between them, quiet but heavy. Adam shifted in his seat, his gaze falling to the floor. His paw brushed the football beside his foot, absently rolling it forward and back.

“...That song... feels like holding onto someone who’s already gone.”

“Exactly.”

Their eyes met—just briefly—but there was something unspoken there. Recognition.

The air felt almost sacred, the way it did after something honest had been said.

Ian inhaled slowly, his paws still resting on the edge of the piano bench. His tail flicked once before curling back around his legs.

When he finally spoke, his voice was soft—steady, but heavy with something deeper beneath the calm.

“When I was little, my parents used to make me play for their guests.”

He looked past them, toward the empty seats, as if he could still see the ghosts of those elegant gatherings.

“They’d tell me to smile, to bow, to be perfect. Every note had to be beautiful—not for me, but for them. It stopped being music after a while.”

His voice trembled, just slightly, but he didn’t stop.

“I thought if I just... did it well enough, maybe they’d see me. Not the prodigy. Not the performer. Just... me.”

He exhaled shakily, eyes lowering.

“But they never did. And I guess... I stopped believing anyone could.”

The words hung in the air, quiet but cutting. Fletcher watched him, chest tightening. Chester leaned back in his chair, eyes somber.

And Adam—for the first time—didn’t look guarded.

“...They made you forget who you were too.”

Adam said softly. Ian’s eyes flicked to him—the faintest surprise in the golden light—but he didn’t deny it. He only nodded once, slow and small.

“You know, I used to think the stage was the only place I mattered. But now, I can’t stand it unless I’m alone. When there’s no one to impress.”

Adam huffed softly, but not unkindly.

“Guess that’s what happens when people turn you into a mirror. You end up hating your reflection.”

Ian’s gaze drifted down to the keyboard.

“...And you? Who told you what you were supposed to be?”

Adam hesitated—a faint flicker of conflict crossing his face before he muttered.

“My dad. And... myself.”

He looked up, meeting Ian’s eyes again.

“They all said the same thing. Be strong. Be straight. Be... normal.”

Ian listened quietly, and then asked softly.

“...And what happens when you can’t?”

Adam let out a dry, humorless laugh.

“You break. You hide it. You pretend the cracks aren’t there. Until someone plays a song that makes you feel everything you’re trying not to.”

Ian’s eyes softened, voice quieter than before.

“Then maybe music’s not the problem. Maybe it’s what’s left when the pretending stops.”

Adam looked away, but his jaw tightened—not in anger this time, but to keep something fragile from spilling out.

The silence that followed wasn’t heavy this time. It was alive.

Fletcher, seeing the thread that’s begun to form, asked gently.

“Do you really think you’re not strong enough, Adam?”

Fletcher broke the quiet, his voice calm but unwavering—gentle, yet piercing. Adam stiffened slightly, his brown eyes flicking to

Fletcher, then away.

“...I don’t know. Maybe not the kind of strong people expect.”

He stared straight ahead at the piano, as if it were safer than looking anyone in the eye.

“I can take hits. Run until I drop. Pretend nothing gets to me. That’s easy.”

A pause. His voice thinned, almost trembling.

“But the kind of strong it takes to... be honest? To say out loud what you are? That’s the part that scares me.”

Ian’s eyes softened. He leaned forward slightly on the bench, his tone quiet but firm.

“Maybe that’s the kind of strength that actually matters.”

Adam looked up, startled—his brown eyes meeting Ian’s yellow eyes again. The two of them held it, neither speaking, but the understanding between them deepened in the silence that followed.





First Step



The dorm corridor hummed faintly with Saturday quiet—the muffled sounds of showers running, doors clicking open and shut, someone's playlist leaking softly through a wall.

Fletcher stood in front of Room 501, smoothing down the gray fur on his arm as he held a paper cup of coffee from the lobby machine. Chester leaned against the opposite wall, paws in his pockets, tail flicking lazily.

They'd already knocked twice. The faint shuffle of movement behind the door told them Adam was inside.

“Adam? It’s us. Ready to go?”

Fletcher called Adam gently. A pause. Then, through the door, Adam's voice—rough, muffled, embarrassed.

“...Yeah. Just—give me a sec.”

Chester shot Fletcher a knowing grin, arms crossed.

“A sec or a minute, you think?”

“Maybe both.”

They waited. The lock didn’t click yet. Inside, they could hear faint pacing—a nervous rhythm, then silence again.

“Adam, you know, Ian’s not gonna care if your fur isn’t perfect, right?”

Fletcher lightly teased Adam just enough to ease him. Another pause. Then a groan.

“...It’s not that. I just—”

Adam stopped himself. A long exhale followed.

“...I’ve never done this kind of thing before.”

“What, meeting friends for coffee? Scandalous,” Chester said, giggling. A muffled *thump* sounds—maybe a thrown shirt hitting the wall. Fletcher chuckled softly, stepping closer to the door, his voice calm and steady.

“Hey. You don’t have to worry. It’s just us—same as before. Me, Chester, and Ian. No pressure. Just talking, yeah?”

The hallway fell quiet again. Then, finally—click.

The door opened a crack. Adam peeked out, ears slightly back, fur freshly brushed but still flustered. He looked like someone caught halfway between wanting to vanish and wanting to belong.

“...You sure this isn’t weird?”

“Only if we make it weird. And we won’t.”

Fletcher answered, smiling warmly.

“Come on, tough guy. Coffee’s on me,” said Chester, grinning widely.

Adam huffed, rolled his eyes, but stepped out into the hall. And just like that, the three of them started down the corridor together—toward the café.



The little café hummed with soft weekend energy—sunlight spilling through its tall windows, catching dust motes and steam from the espresso machine. The air smelled of roasted beans, vanilla, and something freshly baked.

At a corner table by the window, Ian sat with a half-finished cappuccino, the cup's rim traced by his paw as he watched the campus courtyard outside. His usual calm composure showed, but there was a flicker of nervousness as well.

Then the bell over the door chimed.

Fletcher stepped in first, smiling at the warmth of the café, tail swaying faintly. Chester followed, bright and easy, and just behind him, Adam—who paused at the doorway, taking in the crowd, the sunlight, the sight of Ian by the window.

For a heartbeat, Adam almost turned back. But Fletcher looked over his shoulder, catching his eye—a small, reassuring nod.

They walked together toward the table.

Ian looked up, his yellow eyes softening as he recognized them.

“You came.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

Fletcher answered, smiling, taking a seat across from Ian. Chester

slid into a seat beside Fletcher, while Adam hesitated before taking the one beside Ian.

For a moment, no one spoke—just the hiss of the espresso machine, the murmur of other students chatting nearby. Then Fletcher broke the silence.

“So... how’s everyone been this week?”

“Practicing. Not as much as before, though. Been trying to... breathe a little.”

Ian said with a soft chuckle. Chester replied with a teasing lilt to his voice.

“That’s a start.”

Adam glanced out the window, then back at Ian. He opened his mouth, closed it again, then muttered quietly.

“...I didn’t think I’d actually come.”

“Then I’m glad you did.”

The hyena looked at Ian for a moment, uncertain how to respond—but there was something in Ian’s tone that disarmed him, a simple acceptance that didn’t ask for anything in return.

“See? Not so weird after all,” said Fletcher, smiling spokely.

“...We’ll see.”

Adam muttered, averting his gaze as though embarrassed. But tension in his frame, softened.

“Alright, so Chester and I will go order. Adam, what do you want?”

Adam fidgeted slightly at Fletcher’s words, his claws tapping the table. He looked up at the menu board but didn’t seem to see it—his

ears flicked back.

“Uh... I dunno. Just— whatever you’re having’s fine.”

Chester grinned, tilting his head.

“Come on, man, you’ve got to have some preference. Latte? Mocha? Black? Something to match the brooding aesthetic?”

Adam shot him a dry look, a tiny smirk tugging at the edge of his muzzle despite himself.

“Brooding aesthetic? Really?”

“I’ll take that as a ‘surprise me,’ then.”

Chester answered back, chuckling softly.

“...Yeah, sure. Just— not too sweet.”

Adam sighed, though he didn’t really seem bothered.

“Got it. One ‘not too sweet, but secretly sweet’ coming right up.”

Chester answered, and Fletcher nudged Chester playfully as they headed toward the counter. Behind them, Ian and Adam sat beside each other, the quiet stretching out between them. Ian’s tail flicked once, then he smiled faintly.

“You don’t like sweet things?”

Ian asked Adam, smiling. Adam shrugged, looking down at the table.

“It’s not that. But... used to get teased for it. Liking anything ‘soft,’ you know?”

Ian answered, even more softly.

“Soft doesn’t mean weak.”

Adam glanced up, caught off guard by how simply and sincerely Ian said it.

The bell at the counter dinged, the hiss of steamed milk filling the pause. Across the café, Fletcher glanced over his shoulder, watching the two.

“You know, I used to think ‘soft’ was a flaw too. My parents didn’t like it when I cried after a performance. Said it made me look fragile.”

Ian spoke, voice light but steady.

“Yeah. That sounds familiar.”

Adam said, almost murmuring. Ian studied him, the way Adam’s eyes lingered on his own paws instead of his face.

“So you stopped liking things that reminded you of that. Sweet stuff, small things... things that felt real.”

Adam blinked, surprised by the accuracy. His mouth opened slightly, then closed.

“...You read people like you play piano.”

“Then I guess you’re a pretty clear melody.”

Adam looked away quickly, the tips of his ears twitching pink under his fur. He exhaled through his nose, shaking his head with a low chuckle.

“You talk like that to everyone?”

“Only when I mean it.”

Ian answered, smiling faintly. Adam didn’t respond right away. Instead, he looked outside, then back at Ian. When he finally spoke, his voice was quieter, stripped of its usual gruffness.

“I don’t... get people like you.”

“People like me?”

“Yeah. You make being yourself look easy.”

Ian’s smile faded into something softer. He shook his head.

“It’s not. But... I decided it’s harder pretending not to be.”

For a long moment, they just looked at each other—two different kinds of loneliness finding a strange kind of symmetry.

Then, from the counter, Fletcher’s voice cut through the quiet, bright, and warm.

“One cappuccino, one black, and one mystery drink for the brooding hyena!”

Chester burst out laughing.

Ian and Adam both glanced up—Ian with a small, knowing smile, Adam with an almost embarrassed huff. But there was a faint light in his eyes now, something softer than before.

Ian continued talking, his voice, soft and gentle.

“You know, Adam... you don’t have to talk if you don’t want to. I’m fine just sitting here.”

“Yeah, but then you’d just... stare at me with that ‘I’m-reading-your-soul’ look you do.”

Ian blinked, caught off guard, then laughed — a genuine sound that surprised even him.

“Adam, I do not have a soul-reading look.”

“Trust me, you do. It’s all quiet and polite, but it’s like you can see right through me.”

“Maybe I just... listen harder than most people.”

“Yeah. Guess I’m not used to being listened to.”

Ian tilted his head, his tone gentler now.

“Then maybe that’s what we can do for each other. You let me listen. I’ll let you see me.”

Adam looked at Ian—really looked this time. His brown eyes met Ian’s yellow eyes. For the first time, there was no tension behind his voice.

“Deal.”

At Adam’s answer, a faint smile crossed Ian’s muzzle—soft and genuine.

At the counter, Fletcher and Chester glanced over their shoulders and caught the moment—the moment something started. The barista called out their order, and Fletcher and Chester returned back to the table.

“Alright, one cappuccino for me, one black for Chester, and... one mocha for someone who definitely doesn’t like sweets.”

The soft *clink* of mugs preceded Fletcher’s cheerful voice. Steam rose in little curls from the drinks.

“...You didn’t.”

Adam glared playfully, though his ears flicked back in mock annoyance.

“Oh, he did. Extra chocolate, too.”

Chester answered, grinning, while setting his cup in front of him.

“Hey, it was either that or herbal tea.”

Fletcher said innocently. Ian chuckled, tail curling loosely behind him.

“Mocha suits you more anyway. Looks tough, tastes kind.”

“You’re all terrible.”

Still, Adam took a sip—and when the warmth and sweetness hit, his ears twitched. He tried to hide the tiny, traitorous smile that crept across his face. Chester didn't let that go unnoticed.

“What’s that? Did I just see a smile?”

“Shut up.”

Adam glared at him again—but it’s softer this time. Ian smiled quietly at the small, easy laughter passing between them.

“This... is nice. I didn’t think it would be, but it is.”

“Guess it takes coffee to make that happen.”

At Chester’s words, the group laughed—gentle, warm. Outside the window, petals from the cherry trees drifted across the campus paths, dancing in the breeze.

The café had grown busier now. Sunlight filtered through the wide front windows, scattering soft patterns across the table where Fletcher, Chester, Ian, and Adam sat. The conversation drifted between laughter and pauses that felt comfortable now.

“So, Ian, tell us, what’s the next big recital? Gotta know when to come and clap obnoxiously loud.”

Chester stirred his black coffee, tail flicking lazily.

“There’s one in June, actually. A duet performance.”

“Duet? Anyone we’d know?”

Fletcher asked, curious.

“Not yet. Still looking for someone brave enough to share the stage.”

Ian said it casually, but his gaze drifted toward Adam, who happened to be looking down into his cup. Their eyes met briefly

before Adam cleared his throat and muttered.

“Yeah, well... can’t help you there. I can’t even clap on beat.”

“That’s okay. You can be moral support. Or the guy who brings the post-show snacks.”

Chester spoke, grinning.

“Now that I can do,” said Adam, and everyone laughed, the sound easy and real. Fletcher watched the exchange—Adam’s awkward half-smile, Ian’s quiet amusement—and couldn’t help but notice how natural it felt now, how the two were taking care of each other.

“You know, we should do this again. Not just coffee — something like... I don’t know, a walk, maybe? Around campus or by the lake?”

Fletcher said softly. Ian nodded, his voice, warm.

“I’d like that.”

“Yeah, yeah. Fine. As long as it’s not a poetry circle or something.”

Adam pretended to grumble, but there was a little smile that he couldn’t hide.

“No promises.”

Chester teased Adam, snickering, and they all laughed again.

Outside the window, a breeze stirred the cherry blossoms. The petals drifted past in lazy spirals, as if they had nothing to hide.



The bell above the café door jingled softly as it swung open. Warm air spilled out into the crisp midday breeze.

Fletcher and Chester stepped out first, side by side, laughing about something small—a joke, a look. Behind them, Ian and Adam followed, their pace slower, quieter.

The campus was alive in spring colors. Cherry blossoms drifted like falling snow, scattering across the cobblestone path. The lake glinted in the distance. For a while, they all walked together—four silhouettes under the light. The laughter faded into a comfortable hush. Then, Chester asked Fletcher.

“So, where to next?”

“Let’s just walk. No plans.”

“Fine by me.”

They drifted toward the open quad. Fletcher glanced over his shoulder. Behind them, Ian and Adam walked a few steps apart, talking—soft, almost shy. Ian kept talking.

“You know... I wasn’t sure you’d come today.”

“Yeah. Me neither.”

“What changed your mind?”

Adam looked at him—the wind catching a loose strand of fur near Ian’s face, the sunlight painting his eyes gold.

“...Guess I wanted to stop running from myself for once.”

Ian smiled, gentle and knowing.

“That’s a good place to start.”

They kept walking. It was as if they didn’t need to say anything.

Then, as they passed beneath a canopy of petals, Adam’s paw brushed against Ian’s. He hesitated—then, slowly, let it stay there.

Ian’s fingers twitched—a startled breath—and then he tightened

the hold, just slightly.

No words. Just contact. Warm, real, and trembling with the kind of courage that didn't need to be declared.

A few steps ahead, Fletcher glanced back. His blue eyes softened. Chester noticed too and smiled. Fletcher whispered:

“They found their song.”

And so the four walked, like children taking their first steps, their paws intertwined, not letting go.

The End.





## Epilogue



The recital hall glowed under soft amber lights. The stage gleamed, polished to mirror the grand piano that waited at its center. Rows of students, professors, and visitors murmured quietly, programs rustling like a gentle tide.

In the fifth row, Fletcher, Chester, and Adam sat side by side. Fletcher held the printed program neatly folded in his paws; Chester lounged comfortably beside him, tail swaying; Adam sat still, his nerves visible only in the restless twitch of his ear.

The lights dimmed. Silence gathered.

Ian stepped into the spotlight. Dressed in a simple black suit, he carried himself with calm grace, but his golden eyes betrayed the slightest shimmer of emotion. He bowed, sat, and for a breath, the hall held its breath.

Then, the first notes fell.

He began with Solveig's Song. The same melody Fletcher had once suggested — but now, it was different. It carried a warmth, a promise, a reflection of something found. Each phrase rose gently, tenderly, and when it softened, it wasn't sorrow anymore—it was peace.

Adam watched, completely still. His reflection shimmered faintly in the piano's lacquered surface, as if the music were reaching straight toward him, again.



After the concert, the four of them stepped outside into the summer evening. The air hummed with cicadas; the campus lights shimmered off the lake.

Ian carried a bouquet of coneflowers from Adam—a symbol of eternal happiness, with colors brown and yellow—and Adam walked beside him, paw brushing his lightly as they talked in low voices.

Seeing them, Chester spoke to Fletcher:

“Hey, you were right, you know.”

“About what?”

“That everyone deserves a chance at happiness.”

Fletcher looked at the two walking ahead—Ian's tail flicking gently against Adam's, the sound of their laughter mingling with the wind. He smiled.

“Yeah... and some of them actually take it.”





## Author's Note



Many of you may be wondering whether “The Starlights Project” wasn’t supposed to have ended with *Starlights: Epilogue*. The truth is, this new work, *Starlights: On Campus*, should be viewed less as a work published under the “Starlights Team” name and more as a sequel where I, ”Fletcher the Husky” personally expanded and incorporated it into the *Starlights* universe. The original *Starlights* series properly concluded as a high school trilogy—*Starlights*, *Starlights: Merry Christmas*, and *Starlights: Epilogue*. I suppose I simply developed a desire to design an independent sequel separate from the original work.

This likely raises two questions. First, why did I create this as a solo work rather than a team project? Second, what story was I trying to tell that made me restart a project I had already finished?

Let me start with why I created this work on my own rather than

as a team. There are two main reasons. The first is practical. It's been quite some time since the original *Starlights* was released, and each team member is living a busy life. "The Starlights Project" was never about pursuing commercial success—our goal was to create quality work and share it with as many people as possible. The team members' participation came from volunteering their own time. However, with their continued participation becoming realistically difficult, planning another large-scale project simply wasn't feasible.

The second reason is my desire to express everything I wanted to say in my own voice. If you've read *Starlights: On Campus*, you'll have noticed that the writing style differs significantly from the original, and in many ways differs from typical Korean prose. While this style of mine may have felt unfamiliar to many readers, I believed it was better suited for conveying the story I wanted to tell.

So what story was I trying to tell that made me restart this project? Above all, I wanted to talk about "the love that people give" and "the preciousness of those we love." Fletcher and Chester are already a couple who found love through the original series, but they begin this story still unable to openly share their love for each other with everyone. Fletcher and Chester find themselves between Ian, who doesn't particularly hide that he likes men, and Adam, who despises the fact that he likes men.

Meanwhile, Ian has lived as a wealthy young heir experiencing loneliness, having virtually no one who has ever seen him as "Ian Taylor" himself. For Ian, simply having someone see him as his complete, authentic self becomes a precious experience of being

loved.

Adam is someone who has internalized hatred after enduring constant pressure and contempt from his father. For Adam, there's a fear that no matter how hard he tries, he'll never be enough. It doesn't matter to Adam who the other person is—they simply need to see him as sufficient.

Despite their vastly different backgrounds, Ian and Adam have conditions that allow them to embrace each other. For Ian, Adam is enough simply by seeing him as Ian. For Adam, Ian is the person who sees him as enough—Ian the person, before being a prodigy or a young heir.

Ian and Adam find "the love that people give" within each other and experience "the preciousness of those we love." Watching Ian and Adam, Fletcher and Chester grow further, learning to cherish their own love and each other even more deeply. This was the story I wanted to tell through this work.

Love stories in novels often feel like fairy tales, don't they? I've always created the *Starlights* series thinking of it as a fairy tale for adults—for us—so I don't deny that this story also has its fairy tale-like elements. But I believe that someone who ventures into the world without ever having read fairy tales sees the world differently from someone who ventures out after reading them. I hope to meet you again through my work someday...

The End.



# Starlights: On Campus

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