

LYKOS

THIRD AGE

Chapter 11

(Of a Different Stripe)

Fletcher's fingers drummed lightly in rapid succession along the surface of the old wood table, his eyebrows unintentionally furrowed as he looked around the anteroom of the museum. Artyom, Udo and Duncan had squished onto the red leather couch pushed up beneath the window, leaving Fletcher to the chair and his thoughts. The History Museum had been a wellspring of knowledge about werewolves, a sanctuary when they needed it... but it was also the place they went to when life went careening off the rails. Fletcher's caramel colored eyes kept briefly looking at Yom before deflecting back across the rest of the anteroom. He could feel his anger simmering beneath the surface until it suddenly boiled over.

"You could tell something was wrong but you didn't call us?" Fletcher asked Artyom, his eyes taking on a fierce orange glow. Yom's own eyes narrowed in turn.

"It happened too fast, I didn't realize until he was changing. You were with him at breakfast too, why didn't you notice anything?" Yom growled back.

"This isn't about placing blame right now, we're here to get to the bottom of things." Udo said, trying to calm the others down. Duncan frowned where he sat.

"And how are we going to do that sitting in the curator's waiting room?" Duncan asked before letting out a sigh, leaning back as far as he could on the couch before he rocked forward again, "I didn't even get to see Marco, I just came here as fast as I could. How did he look?" The question hung in the air for a moment before Artyom finally spoke.

"Amazing." he muttered, feeling a stirring just thinking about him. Fletcher shot Yom another glare, although it was hard to disagree.

"It's an even more drastic change than when he first turned into a werewolf. I have no idea how we'd be able to pass it off if we were still trying to keep the secret." Fletcher admitted.

"There are still going to be questions. The whole incoming class knows Marco lost his lycanthropy, and now..." Udo trailed off.

"Now our alpha is a Tanuki." Duncan said, looking up at the sealed door that led into Ren's private study.

"Why is it always you?" Ren asked sharply, her eyes narrowed as she looked at Marco. The question seemed to be mixed with equal parts annoyance, curiosity and intrigue. Marco was smart enough not to respond to the question, trying not to feel too awkward as the experienced keeper circled him slowly. In the matter of a few hours Marco had nearly doubled his body weight in a combination of muscle, fat, bone density and hair. Some of the Tanuki traits had receded after his encounter with Artyom in the woods, but his pointed racoon ears had remained atop his head, as had a slight darkening around his eyes.

Auel stood in front of the frosted window panes, his arms crossed over his chest. He was still exhausted after his late night at the police station with Ren, but the exhaustion seemed to be secondary to the strange sort of magnetism Marco was putting out. It had been potent enough that Ren had asked Artyom to remain outside during her examination and Auel couldn't blame her... Even with Marco feeling vulnerable and putting himself out there for examination, he was exuding masculinity. Auel felt himself wanting to pet Marco's full, long beard - and that didn't even come close to answering the questions that surrounded the obscene bulge in the gray sweatpants Marco had been forced to borrow.

"Was there anything that wasn't in the report you gave to the police?" Auel asked finally, trying to give Marco something more tangible to respond to than Ren's rhetorical question. Marco nodded slowly.

"I know it sounds crazy, but when I pulled out the knife, there was this... jolt, like a static shock. I didn't really think much of it at the time. I guess in the back of my mind I must have thought it was some surge of his powers during the attack or something, but..." Marco trailed off given the fact that he had become the evidence to the contrary. Ren exhaled slightly, moving back behind her desk.

"We are in untested waters. A keeper can study a lifetime and still not know everything there is to know for protecting werewolves. From what I've gathered, Tanuki and Kitsunes do not use keepers because they have their own magic. That means there are far fewer individuals to understand their dynamics. We may only be able to learn the rules by speaking with Rodrigo." Ren replied. Marco shifted a little bit uncomfortably.

"I'm not that inconspicuous right now." Marco commented.

"You've got a whole pack of helpers just outside. I'm sure they could be made useful." Auel said. Marco nodded for a moment. He would just have to delegate, there wasn't really an alternative at the moment.

"Is there any other way we can learn about the attack? Who did this, what they want?" Marco asked. Auel shot Ren a glance as she sat down behind her desk.

"We already have people looking into it." Ren said with an edge in her voice.

Little by little, the light of day faded from the window of the hospital room, leaving the occupants to rely more on the plastic sconces spaced equally around the room in between oxygen tubing, vacuum pumps, pamphlet holders and closets full of supplies. Rodrigo had spent the night in surgery and the morning in recovery before eventually being assigned a room in the intensive care unit as a precaution while he healed. There was a general din of conversation and typing from the nurse's station outside, though the vending machines were a bit further away than they had been in the emergency room.

Rigo felt relieved to be in a normal hospital room, the board covered with his name and blood sugar levels, phone numbers and dietary suggestions. Beck remained by Rigo's bedside, but the kitsune's attention was directed fully at the RN that had come to give them both an update on everything that was going on. Beck had been able to tell right at once that there was something different about Austin, feeling an electric charge radiating from the nurse. Beck

wasn't sure if he felt it too and was being professional, or if he was unaware of Beck's abilities, but it hardly seemed like the time to interrupt.

"Your recovery time is expected to be six to eight weeks." Austin explained, his reddish-auburn hair shifting slightly as he spoke, "Keep in mind that the skin on the surface is going to heal much faster, it's the deeper tissue we're going to be careful about, the fascia that makes up your abdominal wall. You'll want to avoid putting pressure on your abdomen or lifting more than ten pounds."

"I'm pretty sure one of my textbooks weighs ten pounds on its own." Rodrigo murmured, although it was only hitting him then that being stabbed right before classes started would put him at a serious disadvantage, and he was already starting a semester late. Austin took a breath at the gravity of the situation but pressed on.

"I know it's not going to be easy. Accommodations will need to be made. Your professors might let you leave your textbooks somewhere safe in the classrooms and one of the other students could help get them there in the first place." Austin suggested.

"I can totally do that." Beck said eagerly. Austin smiled.

"See, things are already falling into place." he said before looking back at the paperwork, trying to make sure he didn't miss anything, "You'll have a follow up in a week with Doctor Woods. He's going to want to make sure the internal sutures are being absorbed properly and that there's no herniation. He'll also keep tabs on things to see about any natural healing quotient." Austin said.

"Like fast healing?" Beck asked curiously. Austin nodded.

"I know I heal a little bit faster than humans but not nearly as fast as werewolves." he said. Beck sat up straighter in his chair at the confirmation, he was more certain than ever that Austin was also a kitsune like he was. Austin, ever the professional, was focused on Rigo. "Do you know where Tanuki fall on the spectrum?" Austin questioned. Rigo seemed to sink into himself a bit more at the question.

"I don't remember ever healing faster than anyone. Paper cuts take almost a week to close up for me." Rigo said, although his unspoken concern was the fact that since the stabbing, he hadn't been able to manifest his abilities or his traits. He hoped to himself that all the energy was being redirected towards healing rather than something even worse.

"Well, either way you'll be in good hands. You got help in time and the wound wasn't nearly as bad as it could have been. I'm sure you'll heal up fast." Austin replied.

"One of our RA's reached out to help however they can as well and would stop by later if Rigo can have more than one visitor." Beck commented.

"Is Marco coming?" Rigo asked hopefully. Beck shook his head.

"Rayne Fletcher I think, the gamer." Beck replied. Rigo nodded a little duly at that.

"Before I let you get back to resting, the last part we need to go over are your medications and wound care. The biggest part is going to be antibiotics." Austin explained, starting to describe how it would make him feel before going into the reasons they were using them and the risks that came along with them. Rigo tried to focus but his mind kept drifting back to the shadowy figure in the sweatshirt that had stabbed him, the feeling of the knife sizzling and burning and throbbing inside him, and then the relief that had come when Marco had found him and saved him. He was glad that there were so many people willing to help keep him on track

for school, but it was a larger disappointment than he'd expected that Marco wasn't one of the ones coming. Inadvertently, Rigo reached out to take Beck's hand in his, squeezing it.

"You'll leave me a copy of the papers, right? It's a lot to take in." Rigo said, bringing his focus back. Austin smiled warmly.

"Of course, and we'll make sure you've got everything you need. I'll go print you out a copy." Austin said with a smile before ducking out of the room. Beck turned swiftly to face Rigo.

"He's a kitsune, I know it!" Beck said excitedly. Rigo's eyes widened in wonder.

"Is he? Can you smell him?" Rigo asked. Beck shook his head.

"No, more like... when you put on a shirt from the dryer and you realize you're carrying a lot of static now? It's hard to describe." Beck said. Rigo grinned.

"I think that describes it pretty well. I'm glad there was something else about this trip exciting besides me." he smirked. Beck leaned over to rest his forehead against Rigo's temple.

"The only thing important about this is that you're going to be okay and I'm going to do whatever it takes to help you." he said. Rigo smiled at that, letting his eyes close as he exhaled a bit, hoping it would be as easy as Beck made it feel.

The dorm room was quiet aside from the occasional clatter of keys on a keyboard. It was hard for Marco to imagine a more comforting place. It was perfectly lit, it smelled like the men he loved, and there were ample snacks. Marco sat on the couch with a laptop, his legs propped up on an upholstered storage cube that doubled as an ottoman. He felt a tiny bit guilty about having to shift some of his RA duties to online questions and answers, but in light of everything that had happened, they had taken to it quite well. Udo had volunteered to meet with some that wanted to talk in person, Yom had said he had to go on errands, and Fletcher was headed to the hospital. That left Marco and Duncan.

Marco sent another email before he looked up across the room at where Duncan sat, ordering the textbooks he'd need for the new semester through the school store's web portal. It was hard for Marco not to appreciate how lucky he was to have accumulated a pack of such handsome men around himself. Duncan's frizzy rust colored hair stood out on campus, pulled back into a bit of a man bun that looked more masculine with the shorter sides of his head and the thicker, bushier beard he'd been cultivating. Added to that, he was the only one in the pack involved in athletics and his broad shoulders and built arms always seemed in peak physical condition. Marco even appreciated his flare, the tattoos on the back of his arms depicting the periodic table of element entries for silver and gold.

A slow, languid hand started to slide up and down Marco's belly as he looked at Duncan, appreciating the subtle ways he'd influenced him. Much like Yom, Duncan had started growing his beard out more to appeal to his alpha. It was working. Marco started to imagine where the years might take them all, how they'd grow and mature. As Marco pictured their future, he set his laptop aside on the couch, moving his hand to caress the mound beneath the bulge in his sweatpants. His balls were so hot and heavy... just like Duncan.

After a few moments of groping, it became clear that Marco needed more. He slid a thumb under the waistband of his sweatpants and tugged them down, allowing his fat, thick

cock to smack against the curve of his belly. Marco slowly coiled his fingers around his member, feeling its girth. He gave it a squeeze, a tug, and then a good long stroke. Marco's eyes fluttered half shut as he started to jack off, stroking up and down. Marco's belly gurgled in delight at the indulgence. Marco was surprised Duncan hadn't already heard or smelled him pleasuring himself, assuming the other was too engrossed in his online shopping to notice.

Marco's hot blood was pumping through his body, his skin growing warm as a faint sheen of perspiration moistened the hair on his chest. He always got a bit warm and sweaty when he jacked off, but before he could overheat, the Tanuki started to feel a soft, sweet smelling breeze kiss his exposed skin. It caressed Marco's cheeks, brushed his shoulders and then danced across the delicate hairs on his arms before creeping outward in an unseen current. The cheap plastic window blinds began to clatter faintly, just as they did when Marco's fan was on, but this was no ordinary breeze. It doubled back upon itself in coils and spirals, creating miniscule eddies and advancing ever so slowly like a predator stalking its prey.

As the gentle wind crossed the wide stretch of windows and reached its target, it played with the stray hairs beneath Duncan's bun for a moment before spilling around his thick, agile neck and cascading over his shoulders and down his chest. Marco's back arched as he gasped, his eyes flashing an intense violet hue. In that moment, Marco realized that he could feel Duncan's body from across the room as if he was running his fingers over the other himself. The realization shook some of the haze from his mind as he started putting thoughts to instincts. Duncan had not heard or smelled him jacking off before because Marco had not wanted to be seen or heard. His wishes had manipulated the space around him in subtle, amazing ways like some kind of magic.

Magic... The word danced back and forth through Marco's mind as he started to grin to himself. Werewolves did not have magic, Komainu did not have magic, but Tanuki? They were trickster spirits, magical beings detailed in lore and story. If he was tapping into his magic, just what was he capable of? Marco looked back at Duncan with renewed focus, thinking back to the fantasies that had been fueling his masturbation just a few moments prior. Marco raised one hand, feeling the breeze sweeping down the length of his arm before it unspooled outward to connect to Duncan. Marco focused both on his roommate and on his fantasies.

Duncan reviewed all the items in his shopping cart, comparing the list to the notepad file he'd compiled from the requirements emailed out by the professors for his classes. He'd made it about three quarters of the way down the list when he felt a strange and intense tingling blossom across his face, his chest and his groin. It was like his leg had fallen asleep and been woken up to pins and needles, but it was spread across places that couldn't fall asleep like that. Duncan reached up to touch his cheek, gasping as his fingers plunged into thick, bushy, rusty hair several inches further out than he'd anticipated. He looked down at the glass of his laptop to see his reflection, his jaw dropping open as he visibly watched his beard pushing out longer and thicker from his face while his hairline seemed to be receding up above.

"Boss man?" Duncan called out as he turned around, the shock over his own changes suddenly doubled as he saw Marco on the couch. If Marco had been big before, Duncan lacked words for what he'd become now. The Alpha had already added a good seven inches to his cock, letting it rise up and rest between the two faint streaks of grayish tan in his long beard. Marco's pointed racoon ears had emerged from the top of his head, his plush striped tail

snaking its way down the couch and his bare feet now sported sharp claws. His belly was nearly the size of a bean bag chair, rising and falling with each breath. Marco huffed and panted, adding a second hand to his cock before he looked at Duncan with a needy expression on his face.

"I can't... I can't control it. I'm so horny..." Marco groaned. Duncan stood up, moving closer to comfort or help, but as he approached he was suddenly hit with the full scent of Marco's musk. The complex combination of aromas was appealing on a normal day, but now it was supercharged with enough added zest that Duncan started to feel his mouth watering and his cock hardening just from the mere proximity. He stumbled a little, suddenly at odds between his intentions and his instincts. Duncan's eyes flashed amber as he panted, his fingers aching as his nails involuntarily pushed out into claws. He looked down, seeing his auburn beard tickled at his collar bone, then his sternum, still growing longer. Every breath he gasped for passed over sharpening fangs.

Marco's eyes blazed with purple light as he jacked himself off, never breaking eye contact with Duncan. and he looked at Duncan, watching his frizzy hair disappear from his scalp until his bare skull was visible, framed by the thickening mane of his rusty beard. A pop echoed through Duncan's abdomen, followed by another and then a third. His body twitched and stretched, growing taller. His clawed hand tugged at his shirt, yanking it off, revealing that the fur on his chest had gotten thicker where it had been tingling before. The football player pawed at his pants before letting them sink, his aching cock surrounded by a thick mane of longer fur.

Once more, a hungry smile crossed Marco's lips as he gazed into Duncan's pecan brown eyes. Wordlessly, Duncan moved forward again as if he was drawn on a string. The Tanuki reached up, caressing Duncan's head, his wavy hair disappearing as Marco drew his hand along the curve of his skull. In moments his bare scalp was revealed, contrasting wickedly with the far longer beard Duncan appeared to have grown.

"What is this?" Duncan asked, panting hard. Every breath made his broad shoulders rise and fall, his arms curved down at his sides, his dog dick throbbing with his heartbeat.

"This is magic." Marco said softly, using his grip on Duncan's head to pull him in for a heated kiss. Their lips worked overtime wrestling and tangling, their meaty tongues writhing and coiling against one another. Duncan's ears stretched to points as they gained fur, his pert muscled ass prying apart as his tail started to push outward, curving down behind him and beginning to wag with eagerness. Duncan suckled and slurped at Marco's tongue, but his nostrils were enveloped in the heady, cheesy, musky scent of Marco's Tanuki cock so tantalizingly close.

Duncan tried to resist, to stay with Marco in the moment, but his own stomach started to rumble in hunger and need. With a growl of shock, Duncan broke the kiss and plunged his mouth down around Marco's immense member, though as he felt his lips strain and his cheeks puff out, he knew he wasn't going to get much of it down. He wrapped one clawed hand around it, brushing fingers with Marco's. He placed his next hand down lower on the ladder, realizing between the two of them they had four hands on Marco's mighty meat. It became all too easy to follow the flow, rising up and down, jerking his master off with him.

Marco threw his head back onto the top of the couch, letting out a luxurious moan that suddenly doubled in pitch as Duncan's tongue found his enlarged urethra and began to explore

it. Marco's fingers tightened in their grip, his toes tensing and untensing. It was hard to ignore the rush coursing through him. Having sex with his pack was always exhilarating, but thrill of suddenly having access to magic, to be able to manipulate and enhance their perceptions... Marco groaned out louder, loud enough to risk someone outside the room hearing as Duncan's greedy tongue plunged deeper and deeper into the forbidden fissure.

Fur continued to spread across Marco's body, spiraling from his navel to cover his belly, blossoming from his chest to cover his pectorals, wrapping around the curve of his meaty arms. He shuddered, writhed and groaned, working his massive member along with Duncan. The werewolf was trying to fit his mouth around the thick head of his Alpha, lips stretching as much as they could. Marco could feel the heat radiating from Duncan's skin and remembered the fire that boiled in the blood of the Lykos. His brow furrowed, his lungs tightened and then Marco threw his head back, gasping suddenly.

For a split second, it felt like the wettest french kiss of Duncan's life, but the pressure built and his tongue was forced back into his mouth before his cheeks bulged with a sudden overwhelming flood of thick, musky cum. The jock tried with a futile effort to swallow enough of it before he decided to try another tactic instead. Relaxing his throat, it was far easier for Marco's obscene eruption of semen to pump itself down his throat and into his stomach. Duncan's eyes glazed over with contentment, his clawed hands still holding Marco's rod, feeling his stomach rapidly filling. A different kind of warmth spread through him, spreading out from his gut.

Almost reluctantly, Marco removed his hands from his cock, sliding one arm along the back of the couch to his left, then the other to the right, leaning back. His thick, bushy beard draped down across his chest and belly, still almost reaching all the way to Duncan's face. Marco laid there, feeling the flow from him to his lover. There was a faint shimmer to the air as the illusion over Duncan faded away, returning the football player's frizzy auburn manbun and the neatly faded sides of his head.

With docile, almost lazy attempt, Marco tried to do anything else with his newfound magic but found it too challenging in the heat of the moment. There would be time to play with it later. For now there was only the bliss of fulfilling a biological drive and having his bounty received with such fondness by Duncan. While Marco had no doubt his partner would have swallowed every drop if he could, it seemed the flood was too much even for him as the thick pearly goo began to dribble out of his mouth and down his own beard, landing in thick globs and webs across the hair. Marco murmured with satisfaction, letting his eyes slip shut once more.

Artyom had learned through trial and error that there were a lot of nice places on campus to sit or to nap. There were places with views of art, nature, or campus architecture. The stairwell between the first and second floors of the library was one that he favored, especially given that it was sound proofed and seldom traveled, but with the sun having set and the stairwell lined with glass, he would have been on display as window dressing for anyone walking by. The Hawk's Nest would have been even worse given that it wasn't soundproofed, so Artyom found himself sitting on a very nice upholstered bench in the Little Raven cultural center, staring at his cellphone as if it was going to bite him.

He'd been putting it off, there was no doubt about it. The fact that he hadn't gotten a call already was a shock, but it would have been time to rip the bandaid off anyway even if they hadn't learned more about the attack. The information about the knife had only illuminated how much they didn't know. Yom opened his contacts, scrolled to his mother and dialed. He brought the phone up to rest against his bearded cheek, listening to the tones as it connected halfway across the country.

"Artyom, is everything all right?" Marya asked. Artyom frowned.

"What kind of way is that to greet your son?" he asked, a little more of his accent tinging his voice than usual. Marya scoffed.

"Then there is nothing out of the ordinary and you are calling to check up on your mother out of the goodness of your heart?" she asked. Artyom glowered even more, until there was a gentle clucking on the other side, a sound Marya used to soothe Artyom as a child when his temper got the best of him. "It is alright my son. I think you and your father are very much the same. I know I will hear from you when I need to, I just want to make sure you are okay." she said. Yom exhaled slowly, turning to lean his back against the planter and rest his legs along the bench.

"We are all fine... but there was an attack on campus, one of the new students." Yom said. Marya cursed under her breath.

"Was it a hunter?" she asked.

"We don't know, but I need to ask you or dad a question. Marco said that the knife in the attack was crystal, but by the time the city's Keeper got to it, it was that same red dust like Abel gave us before the eclipse. You both know more about moonstone than anyone, do you think the knife has been hanging out for hundreds of years, or do you think someone found a new vein of blood moonstone?" Yom asked. The silence he got on the other side of the line was a surprise at first, then alarming after a longer moment. Yom sat back upright, his feet returning to the floor. "Mama?"

"Zasranec! Balvan!" She exclaimed, startling Artyom. He nearly jumped off the bench as he heard the phone clatter to the counter "Anatoli, you are a dead man!" his mother's voice boomed through the house, loud despite the fact she was no longer holding the phone.

"Mother?" Artyom questioned, but it was no use. Marya's voice was already distant and diffuse, her verbal attack unleashed in rapid staccato blasts of Russian that he couldn't quite make out. Yom sighed, closing his eyes as he turned the other way, putting his legs up on the planter as he reclined the upper half of his body along the bench, turning the phone off and letting his arms droop to either side.

The intention had been to learn about the weapon used in the attack. Even if they hadn't learned about the crystal knife, he wanted to tell his mother about Marco and the attack and that they were alright but Marco had changed. Instead he'd unleashed his mother's wrath, presumably on his father. The more Yom thought about it, though, the more he started to realize why his mother had been so angry... She'd been upset since thanksgiving with how much time he'd been investing in work, even going on a surprise trip to the mines at a time of the year his family normally considered sacred.

"It wasn't a new vein, it was a new vein appearing in an old vein." Yom murmured. The comfortable life the Yashin family enjoyed came largely from moonstone. If it was turning from

something that captured the moon's energy into something that drained abilities out of someone, there was little doubt that it would have scared his father enough to investigate directly and to keep it as secret as possible. There was no going back now, and one way or another he'd be learning more as soon as his mother finished extracting the truth from her husband.

The evening air was filled with the steady fizzle of rain. The drops were small and saturating, soaking the street and filling the air with a haze of precipitation. Kaden had been walking for over two hours, following hints and whispers and trails of evidence that had gone cold months prior. His fingers felt brittle, plunged deep into the pouch of his sweatshirt for warmth, his hood pulled up over his beanie. He'd skulked around Faulkner's Cove athletic shop until it closed, but he hadn't even been sure what he was looking for. All he knew was that it had been the one place Killian had said he was going to investigate.

When the shop closed, Kaden had started wandering. He'd gone to Echo Creek's modest public library to check the records for any unidentified bodies matching Killian's but had come up empty. Eventually Kaden had simply started walking along main street, taking in the sights, wondering if his brother had come to any of these places or seen any of these people. He was just starting to think about returning to the coffee shop to warm up when the brilliant gleam of light shone off the wet driveway ahead.

Despite the inclement weather, the E.C. Auto Shop hadn't closed the garage door while they worked on the cars. Numerous overhead lights and several repositionable lamps were arrayed around the space, glinting off the chrome of a Camaro while its inky blue enamel swallowed the rest. It was a beautiful car, but Kaden felt like a moth drawn to the light given how chilled to the bone he was. Deciding that asking a quick question would serve him better than wandering fruitlessly, he trudged up the driveway, eyes settling on two mechanics.

One was only half visible under the car, standing in a rectangular pit that ran the length of the shop. Even in the shadow of the car, his olive tinted skin contrasted with his khaki coveralls. Round goggles protected the young man's eyes as he worked, the strap running neatly along the shaved sides of his head just beneath the cloth covering that protected his dark hair. On the surface, a very similar looking young man worked to check air pressure and oil levels, possessing the same olive toned skin of the other while possessing an almost regal mane of dreadlocks pulled back into a thick ponytail, a mustache and chin tuft of black hair complimenting his face. As Kaden approached, both men turned to look at him at the same moment as if they'd heard the same scuff of his feet.

"Hey, good evening." Kaden said by way of announcing his presence. The older mechanic gave a nod of his head.

"What can we do for you?" he asked, his voice equally balanced between professional courtesy and wariness. Kaden looked at the nametag on his coveralls, Rafael.

"I'm sort of taking in the sights, staying in town for a little while. I was wondering if there was anything interesting to see or do nearby." Kaden said. Raf's eyes narrowed a little bit as he examined the young man.

“Doing the whole tourist thing?” he asked, wiping his hands on a rag, “Echo Creek is a college town. Everything is sorta built around keeping that running.”

“There’s the history museum I guess.” the mechanic under the car considered.

“Andres...” Rafael murmured to his brother.

“And a movie theater.” Andres amended quickly.

“A history museum?” Kaden asked, perking up a little. Rafael’s lips tightened but he nodded.

“It’s a cultural museum about Japanese internment camps during the second World War. You didn’t come all this way to learn about how the world uprooted people’s lives out of basic fear and paranoia about them being a little different, right?” Rafael asked, a slight menacing edge forming to his smile. Kaden felt his blood grow a little icy at that, as if this mechanic could see right through him and his entire family line, but in that honesty there was some safety in truth. Kaden shrugged.

“Maybe it would be for me. I just came out here to learn about the history of this region, things that happened.” Kaden replied. Rafael didn’t break eye contact.

“Just things that happened, not what’s happening now?” he asked. Kaden shook his head.

“Everything’s always changing, history is the only part that’s certain.” Kaden replied. Rafael nodded at that, grabbing a bottle of water from the workbench to take a swig before he glanced back at Kaden.

“Maybe you should take a look after all. Another important thing about learning from history is making sure you don’t repeat the mistakes of others.” Rafael commented. Kaden nodded at that, still feeling a bit icy from the exchange.

“I think you’re right, I’ll have to check it out in the morning when they open.” Kaden replied before bowing his head, “I’ll let you get back to it.” he said before he moved back out of the glaring light of the auto shop, resuming his walk along Main street.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to say anything...” Andres apologized, looking out at his brother from under the car. Rafael shook his head.

“It’s okay...” Another voice sounded from the doorway to the office. Rafael and Andres both turned to see another young man in the doorway. He was taller than either of them, wearing the same cover-alls although he had unzipped his down to the waist and tied off the sleeves. Broad, muscled shoulders oozed out from the black tank top that hugged his meaty pectorals and washboard abs. The sides of his hair had been shaved shorter than the strip down the center, though all of it had been dyed a pale shade of violet purple.

“Jesse, he’s going to go straight there tomorrow...” Rafael said. Jesse shrugged.

“Ren went from being the keeper of secrets to keeping a hold on the narrative around us. She’s put herself front and center. I’m sure she’s got a few ideas on how that part of her history, of our history, is going to come out.” he said, sighing slowly, “Besides, I’m sure he’s not the only one that’s going to come sniffing around now that Echo Creek is so interesting.”

Rodrigo looked down at the plate of salmon, dill sauce, mashed potatoes, and a fruit cup sitting on the tray before him, feeling even more like an alien in his own skin that he still wasn't hungry. It felt like he'd been snacking and nibbling on things constantly for months. Reluctantly he picked up the waxy cardboard carton of chocolate milk, peeled it open and sipped at it. Across from him, Fletcher smiled with a little bit of reassurance.

"I know it seems hard now, but you'll bounce back from this in no time." Fletcher smiled. Rigo turned, making sure that Beck hadn't yet returned from the bathroom before he looked back at his newest visitor.

"I'm not so sure. I feel... normal, I guess? Normal again? And that feels so much less than normal..." he said softly. Fletcher tried not to betray the fact that he felt a pang of guilt welling up inside, knowing that Marco was likely experiencing powers that had been stolen from Rigo. Eventually he forced a smile.

"Hey, you know what they say, the only constant is change, and if you changed once, who is to say you won't change again." Fletcher said, a little more reality creeping into his smile. Rigo nodded a bit at that, deciding to pick up his fork.

"Yeah. Maybe my powers are just dormant while I heal, and even if they're not, maybe I could get turned back into a Tanuki or something." Rigo said, his brows furrowing a little as he looked back at Fletcher, "Did Marco try to get turned back into a werewolf after he lost his powers?" he asked. Fletcher took half a moment to try and figure out how to phrase his answer.

"He did, yeah. I tried to get them to turn me into a werewolf a couple times too, only nothing took. I didn't realize for a couple months but it was because I was turning into something else." Fletcher said. Rigo's eyes brightened at that.

"Something else? Are you a kitsune too?" he asked. Fletcher shook his head and grinned a bit at that.

"Nope, I'm a Komainu, a Lion-Dog, a guardian spirit." he whispered. Rigo's jaw opened a bit at that in wonder.

"Like those statues outside Chinese Restaurants? I didn't realize they were real..." Rigo said in awe.

"There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." Fletcher quoted with a faint attempt at an accent worthy of Shakespeare, though it devolved into more of a smile at the end. "We don't even know what we don't know yet about all this therianthrope stuff. I know one way or another, there's a way to carve out a happy life from all of this." Fletcher said.

"Alas poor Yorick! I knew him!" Beck's voice came from the doorway where he had turned, posing with a red apple from the vending machine as if it were a skull. After a moment of staring at the fruit, however, he leaned in and took a crunchy bite out of it. Rigo squirmed in the hospital bed at the idea of it. Fletcher grinned wide at the joke though, leaning back to lift his glasses and wipe at the corner of his eye.

"Bravo, bravo!" Fletcher complemented. Beck moved over and resumed his customary spot next to his roommate's bed.

"So, you two talkin' about me while I was gone?" he winked.

"Sort of." Rigo replied, turning to look into Beck's eyes, "Fletcher said that whatever happens, there's still a way to be happy from all this. I'm sure we can." The words were soft,

tender and full of meaning. Beck felt heart warmed by it, enough that his natural wit took a back seat to his sincerity as he nodded eagerly.

"I know we can." he replied. Fletcher smiled softly to himself. He knew that feeling - a feeling of comfort and love in the face of adversity and uncertainty. He'd felt it with Marco, then Yom and Udo and even Duncan over time. The feeling had grown more complex, but he remembered how innocently it had begun in a cramped dorm room with his college crush. There was still a lot of work to do, but how could anything go wrong if it had a firm foundation like that?

The sun had come out, though it seemed to be playing a constant game of cat and mouse. The light rose and fell almost by the second as branches and vines swayed in a brisk wind outside the museum window. The interior felt far warmer and safer by contrast, although Kaden found himself frozen in place looking at the pictures on display. There was a stilted solemnity to those where people posed for the photographs, but the life in their eyes was still visible after all these decades. The slice of life pictures were even harder to bare, coupled with passages describing what life was like in the camps. Kaden stood there feeling like the world's worst time traveler in his sweatshirt and baseball cap, standing before stories of the Kooskia Idaho and Granada Colorado internment camps.

A faint shifting of the floorboards shook Kaden out of his focus. He looked up and spotted the museum's docent dusting some of the cases down the way. He seemed to be about twenty, his soft black hair pulled back into a ponytail, his eyes a light almond brown in shade. He was wearing a burgundy red shirt and black slacks that seemed to almost blend in to the rich red wood that made up the shelves and displays around the museum.

"Do... Do you mind if I ask a question or two?" Kaden asked, breaking the silence. A soft smile crossed the young man's lips.

"Sometimes that's better than just absorbing what the museum has to offer." the docent replied, moving over. Kaden swallowed a little, his heart feeling a little heavier in his chest.

"Did I read this right that after the internment camps closed, people from several of them came here to re-settle?" he asked. The docent nodded.

"Yes. When the war ended, Governor Carr invited Japanese Americans to stay, viewing that the internment was unconstitutional. It was a very unpopular idea at the time, but he was an early advocate." the docent explained. Kaden was finding it harder to make eye contact.

"Do you know if there were any... werewolves... in the internment camps?" he asked under his breath. The docent's smile seemed a little tighter but he bowed his head slightly.

"There were, yes." he replied honestly. Kaden took another breath.

"And they probably got found out, and even if they didn't, they needed a place where they were invited, some place safe." he said. The docent nodded again.

"I would imagine so." he replied, eyes never leaving Kaden.

"And if someone came around, intent on hurting the people that went there for safety, those advocates would do whatever they could to keep them safe." Kaden murmured, speaking as if the fight was draining out of him steadily.

“Protecting one’s family is a strong instinct. I’ve been told it grows even stronger if you failed to do it in the past.” The docent replied. Kaden said nothing for a long moment, looking at the photographs, his fingers digging tighter and tighter into his palms until his knuckles started to turn white and his eyes started to glisten with a build up of moisture.

“It isn’t fair...” Kaden murmured, his voice nearly cracking, “That kind of hate and fear... All those people had their lives messed up, and all the people that did it to them got soaked in that hate, and the people that followed in their footsteps put the hate ahead of their family and all of it was going on beneath the surface with this thin, fragile mask that everything was okay, but it wasn’t, it isn’t.” The docent was silent for a moment before he spoke again.

“The lessons history teaches can be hard to carry, but it can open our eyes so we can see a better path.” he mused finally. Kaden looked into the pictures in front of him, pictures of the prisoners and their captors, then of his reflection in the glass. He’d come all this way to learn what happened to his brother, he’d been traveling from city to city to piece it together, but even without all the pieces, the picture the puzzle was forming was answering enough questions on its own. Whatever fate Killian had met when he came to Echo Creek, finding out the details wasn’t going to bring him any peace.

Kaden took a shuddering breath before he looked at the docent, bowed his head to him and started moving towards the door. He paused just long enough by a clear plexiglass box by the entrance to fish his wallet out of his pocket, empty it of the paper cash he carried and slip it into the box before leaving the museum. The docent turned a little, watching the young man head down the snaking path towards the street, the naked branches of the trees swaying above him in the wind.

“Riku, we get so few visitors and you chased him off already?” Ren’s voice questioned from around the stacks. Riku smiled a little in response.

“He donated, didn’t he?” Riku asked, though the playfulness on his face melted away, replaced by a more serious expression. “He isn’t the one that attacked Rodrigo, is he?”

“No...” Ren replied, “He is a victim of circumstance, a survivor of a battle he did not take part in himself. He only came here for closure. He is not the attacker.”

“But that means we’re back at square one. Someone in Echo Creek attacked a student and stole their powers. The Keepers haven’t ever had to protect someone from something like that before.” Riku said.

“What was it that you said?” she questioned, “The lessons history teaches can be hard to carry, but it can open our eyes to see a better path? We’ll study the past for clues and we’ll look forward towards the future.” Ren said resolutely. Riku gave a more confident nod at that. Ren looked back at the pictures on the walls for a moment, taking a slow breath to steel herself, “Tell the other keepers we’re going to have a meeting. It’s time to consider other tactics.