

LYKOS

THIRD AGE

Chapter 16 (Auld Lang Syne)

The hours had trickled by but music still poured out of the Mill. As the hour grew later, several of the party guests returned to campus, some doubtless making a pit stop to the forest that bordered the school. The decrease of party guests had been met with the surprise of far diner foods, something that Marco's pack availed themselves of. Yom's fangs glistened as he dangled the rare steak above his mouth before dropping the meat in, happily munching on it, his cheeks curling into a smile. There was an odd glitter to his eyes as he looked back at the others.

"It reminds me of family barbecues back home." Yom said eagerly.

"Something tells me there wasn't a lot of cooking involved?" Fletcher asked. Yom merely shrugged, still grinning. Marco glanced up as Beck returned to the table, sweeping down to the backwards facing chair so he could perch against the backrest, leaning in conspiratorially.

"What do you guys know about the Philadelphia Experiment?" Beck asked, peeking over the rim of his rose colored glasses.

"Clearly a government cover up of some of the most sophisticated technologies ever weaponized by man." Fletcher said.

"Isn't that the naval ship that teleported or went invisible or something?" Duncan asked. Rigo shook his head, putting down the chop sticks he'd been using to pick at his sushi.

"Don't indulge them, it's too late." he murmured, dark circles starting to form under his eyes despite the loss of his powers.

"If humanity managed to achieve some high level of technology, why haven't they used it since?" Udo asked, unable to help himself as he nibbled on some cutlets.

"Humans are a very leap first, think later breed. Once something has been achieved, it never seems quite as tantalizing. We made it to the moon with less processing power than a graphing calculator. Now that we've advanced, why haven't we been back?" Beck asked.

"I'm just glad you believe we've been to the moon." Fletcher said with relief. Beck brought up a hand, resting his painted fingernails against his chest.

"What sort of rube do you take me for? There are mirrors you can bounce homemade lasers off of, it's very clear we've been up there." Beck said. Rigo smiled a bit at how well his boyfriend was getting along with everyone, but he turned and looked at Marco, his eyebrows creasing.

"I hope I didn't upset you with my request." Rigo said. Marco looked up, a little surprised before he shook his head.

"No, actually, I think you made several good points. I was thinking when the wolves go out for the next full moon, that might be a good time to give you back the gift. You still have to tell me what I have to do." Marco said. Rigo nodded, smiling.

"I promise I will." Rigo said, though he smiled a bit more, "And maybe you can give in the rest of the way, really kick it into high gear."

“High gear?” Marco asked. Rigo nodded.

“I saw the illusion magic you did with Tobin, and it sounds like Duncan got a taste too, but there’s so much more the Tanuki are capable of.” Rigo said. Marco grinned a bit, stroking his beard.

“So maybe it’s time you teach the RA about himself?” Marco asked. Rigo grinned again.

“Well, it’ll be easier once I have my own abilities too.” Rigo said.

“Just promise you won’t break him, the security deposit on a college boyfriend is very expensive.” Beck commented as he leaned against Rigo’s shoulder.

“I don’t think you ever get security deposits back as a werewolf...” Duncan considered.

“Was it bad your Freshman year?” Rigo asked.

“I cut my head on the sprinkler jumping out of bed...” Fletcher murmured.

“We went through two bed frames...” Udo added, “Although one was from horseplay more than anything.” Udo said with consideration before he paused, spotting Dathan in the corner, sipping from a glass of what had to be blood. Udo considered for a moment before waving him over, “Dathan, wanna sit with us?” he asked. Dathan looked over, eyes glinting red in the light as if he was perpetually trapped in a bad photograph.

“You sure?” he asked, hesitantly moving over to them.

“We were just headed out anyway, you can have our seats.” Rigo said, rising up. Beck languished in his chair, his gangly arms long enough to remain on his boyfriend’s shoulders even as he stood and started to walk away until, at last, Beck followed after like some sort of mobile scarecrow.

“Goodnight boys. Enjoy the unprocessed meats!” Beck called to them as he trotted after his lover. Dathan watched them go, a lopsided smile on his lips before he sat down.

“They’re a cute couple. Kinda nice to see the bond last through everything.” he commented. Yom’s pointed ears had perked up at the scent of blood, his eyes dilating. He sniffed a bit, staring at Dathan’s cup.

“Deer Blood?” he asked. Dathan nodded slowly.

“I think, I’m no connoisseur. I’m still pretty new to all this.” Dathan said.

“I’m sorry we haven’t had a chance to talk more outside of the support group meetings.” Marco said softly, “How are you doing?”

“Okay, I guess...” Dathan said, rotating his cup to swish the contents around, “Night school’s kind of weird at a college. The buildings are a lot emptier than they seem in movies. Most of the other students are Varos too. Some werewolves though, and a couple really nice insomniac humans.” Dathan grinned.

“Have you gone flying yet?” Fletcher asked. Dathan shook his head.

“It’s pretty cold here. Not great on my wings. The trade off is that the nights are longer here than some colleges I could have gone to, so more time to be out. Not a bad trade off.” Dathan smiled.

“I’m glad you came out to the party in general. You seem more alive here than you are in the support groups.” Marco said. Dathan gave a sheepish, forced smile. Marco looked concerned, trying to figure out why.

“Is it because Zane isn’t here?” Udo asked. Dathan shook his head.

"That obvious?" Dathan asked, "He's older than me, and Varos have a bit of an ego thing in general, I'm sure we'd clash here and there, but he's ben getting moodier these last few weeks. He disappears for long stretches at a time and when he comes back he won't talk about what he's doing. Sort of a buzz kill if you ask me. I was actually kind of hoping to meet our host, see if elder Vampires mellow out a bit more." Dathan said.

"Elder vampires?" Fletcher asked. Dathan shrugged.

"Well, older vampires. You think werewolves are treated bad in media, that ain't nothing compared to the Varos. They act like we're some undead eternal monsters roaming the Earth, looking for someone to interview us... We age too, just like the rest of you. Well, maybe three or four times slower." He smirked.

"I guess if someone were to live three hundred years, they might be seen as immortal by those that knew them." Fletcher said.

"Don't get me wrong, the stories say that the first Vampires were immortal, cursed by the gods to walk the Earth in shadow and darkness forever... But I guess that curse got watered down through the ages." Dathan said.

"I wonder just how old our host is." Marco said softly, "I suppose I could always ask him." the Alpha said before rising to his feet.

"You're going to go find him now?" Dathan asked in surprise. Marco grinned a little.

"I have a standing invitation." Marco replied before he wandered toward the doors back into the museum, trying to recall where he had spotted the stairs earlier. Dathan remained behind, tipping his glass of blood back, watching Duncan tear into a half rack of ribs with dangerously sharp teeth.

There wasn't anything else quite like the sharp contrast between searing hot flesh and ice cold bathroom tiles, at least in Deo's experience. He panted softly, a sheen of sweat collecting in the crevice of his collar bones as his fur receded. His ears remained in their lycan state and his skin was doing its best to repair the bite marks on both shoulders, his arms and his neck. One sleeve of his suit jacket hung limply over the top of the stall and he had no idea where his pants were. Deo looked up as he heard someone step in one of the puddles on the bathroom floor, his brown eyes widening in shock when he saw it was his roommate.

"Y-You shouldn't be in here, dude, there's like... blood and jizz and... everything else." Deo said, still feeling a bit too weak to get up. Yale looked down at the slight bulge forcing Deo's otherwise fit and toned stomach to stretch out into a soft belly.

"Busy night?" Yale asked, seemingly unafraid of the risks around him. Normally Deo was proud of his prowess, but there was something about that moment that felt... lackluster. Maybe it was the fact that he'd never expected Yale to see him like that, to see the direct aftermath. Yale stepped into the stall and offered Deo his hand.

"Let's go home." Yale said. Deo's eyes started to glisten and he shook his head weakly.

"T-The party, it was for you..." Deo murmured, feeling a sensation of shame that he was unaccustomed to. Yale sighed softly, grabbing onto Deo's tattooed arm with both hands before

pulling him to his feet. Deo dropped his arms over Yale's shoulders, holding onto him as he arrived in the upright position.

"The person that I was looking for was preoccupied all night. I figure if we go back to our dorm room, I'll have his undivided attention." Yale said, a smile crossing his lips. Deo's eyes widened at that.

"Bro, that's probably the most romantic thing anyone's ever said about me..." Deo said. Yale lifted one eyebrow.

"Is it?" he asked, "Then you better brace yourself, wolf boy." Yale said before he brought his lips to Deo's. Deo's warnings of concern were muffled by his roommate's mouth, but his protests died swiftly. He returned the kiss, his eyes slipping shut with a sense of relaxation and trust he wasn't sure he'd ever felt before. He reached around Yale, one hand massaging his back, the other slipping up to pull the remaining hair stick from his hair. The intricate bun unraveled and a cascade of cedar brown hair fell across his shoulders.

Deo's breath was hot, blasting across Yale's. Deo's strength and stamina came back as he stepped forward, then forward again, pushing Yale against the wall of the bathroom. He plunged his tongue in and out of Yale's mouth, finding a most eager and willing partner. He liked this new side of Yale, the confidence fit him well, although he could sense how new he was to everything else. There was something precious in that, something that Deo wanted to nurture and protect and exploit all at the same time. He broke the kiss, moving to nuzzle Yale's neck, his lips parting before he froze. He gasped softly, looking up at Yale with golden eyes. Yale looked back with a grin.

"What are you waiting for, wolf boy?" he asked before he reached down, coiling his finger around Deo's cock. Deo moaned, then groaned, starting to hump his cock into his roommate's hand. Yale focused, working it faster and harder, squeezing tighter even as he felt Deo's cock shift inside of his grip. There wasn't anything quite like it. He'd jerked himself off more times than he could count, but it was as if Deo's cock was changing in his hand... and it was! The skin grew to a bright red shade, the mushroom shaped tip stretching outward, tapering to a point. The base swelled up, bloating and expanding into rounds while a ring of furry flesh expanded around the base. Deo's balls, already ample, were descending and swelling as marmalade colored fur sprouted across them, hanging down a little from his taint.

As Deo grew, it was easier for Yale to add a second hand, letting them both rise up and down rapidly. Deo whimpered before he kissed Yale furiously, their lips wrestling, their tongues dancing before Deo broke the kiss again, peppering his way down Yale's throat. The red head's wolf ears migrated back to the top of his head, twitching and shifting. His hips gyrated forward and back, working his puppy prick into his roommate's very skilled hands. His eyes clenched as a wet, sticky sound came from behind him. His pert, muscled ass cheeks parted as a rusty orange tail split free. It flexed outward, falling down behind him, wagging and shaking.

Yale watched in wonder as dark brown stubble erupted from Deo's cheeks, encircling his mouth with a mustache and goatee, spreading higher up his sideburns and down his throat. Sickening pops and clicks came as his handsome face began to distend and distort, pressing forward. As Deo's jaw elongated, it made more room for fangs to fill in. His nose grew dark and moist as his nose broadened outward.

Yale gasped as he felt a huge, wickedly clawed hand slide down into his pants, paw pad tipped fingers fishing through his bush before finding his painfully erect cock. A deep, guttural growl came from Deo's throat before he slashed outward, slicing through Yale's gray pants. His boxers in tatters, Yale's manhood sprung forward. Deo looked at it with a great hunger and need, though he wasn't sure if he trusted himself quite yet to suck Yale off without biting him... so he turned around instead and presented himself.

The human was dumbfounded for a moment despite the hormones coursing through his system. Yale stood there, his erection throbbing and exposed to the open air, his nice suit torn apart, his hair unraveled... and his very handsome, very horny werewolf roommate was presenting a furry orange ass to him... Deo's tail was thick and luxurious, the fur spreading across his cheeks and spiraling down his legs to the ever expanding foot paws. Claws scraped tile as Deo added on more and more mass. He slammed a huge hand against the wall of the toilet stalls, panting hard from his muzzle as it pushed outward. Tiny bumps pressed out from his spine, giving his back an almost ridged look before fans of fur spread outward from his spine, wrapping around his ribs and stomach. Bones popped, cartilage popped and every breath filled an increasingly large chest.

Yale had seen Deo go into a wolfman state before, almost nightly since the secret had come out, but he'd never seen Deo like this. He was HUGE! He was furry and muscled, his balls the size of grapefruits and covered in creamy beige fur. Yale tried to take all of his roommate's form in, but there was so much, everything from the trickle of pre dribbling down to add to the puddle on the floor to the undulating, pulsating asshole... That dark sphincter that seemed to be beckoning to him, calling to him. Yale stepped forward, bringing one soft hand to Deo's furry hip. Deo let out a happy snarl, exposing the sharp fangs that filled his muzzle. Yale's other hand came down on his roommate's other hip before he slowly brought the head of his cock to that ring of muscle before him.

Deo's gleaming amber eyes widened in sudden realization. He had been filled by several other werewolves that night, and his ass still was dangerous. He turned his head to warn Yale but he gasped as he felt several inches of man meat plunge into him. A hot breath shuddered out from the werewolf's fangs as his eyes fluttered shut. Deo's grip tightened, his claws starting to cut through the green enamel on the toilet stall. Yale, too, gasped as he thrust into Deo's ass, remaining in for a moment before he slid back most of the way, looking down to see his cock coated with yellowed, feral werewolf cum.

For a long moment, Yale just looked down at the sloppy seconds that coated his dick. This, in a way, was what he had been afraid of all semester. Lycanthropy was a sexually transmitted disease. This was exposure, and yet he wouldn't have taken it back. Horny beasts had fucked his roommate and filled him up, and now Yale was there too, ready to do the same. A strange grin crossed the human man's face. He was good enough. He was good enough to fuck Deo, to leave his mark, to be one of the boys. Yale's grin grew even brighter as he thrust in again, and again, and again. He kept grinning as he threw his weight into it, sliding in as deep as he could get. His fleshy sack slapped against Deo's furry balls. His groin smashed and strained against the leathery ring of muscle that enveloped his cock. His blunt fingers dug into Deo's hips.

Everytime Yale thrust, Deo grunted, his tongue starting to slip out of his mouth. This felt so good, but more importantly, it felt so right. He'd been fucked by the alpha and he'd been fucked by dozens of betas. He'd even let the campus Omega have a go before he turned the tables and returned the favor to all of them except Tobin. After all those experiences that had left him feeling incomplete, there was something oddly satisfying about having Yale smashing him. It wasn't the size, of course, nor was it a particular draw to humans. Maybe what he was looking for was more of a... partner? Deo turned and looked back, seeing the sweat beading on Yale's forehead. His thin eyebrows were angled into a V of concentration and his grin looked as wild as any werewolf's.

Deo growled happily, starting to thrust his hips back with more and more strength, forcing Yale to hold on and keep going. The sounds of their fucking were so wet and so lewd, especially as the previous werewolf spooge began to ooze and drip out of Deo's ass as he was fucked. Yale felt his pulse racing as he kept at it. Maybe this was how he'd become a werewolf, marinated in the seed of others as he took what he wanted. Even if he didn't contract it this time, Yale knew it was time to stop being afraid. There was no going back, no holding back.

"Yeah... Fuck! Yes!" Yale shouted, slamming his cock in as deep as he could get. Deo's back arched, his tail crashing down over Yale's shoulder. Yale managed to growl a bit himself, the sound making Deo suddenly whimper and whine before his huge, pointed canine cock erupted with a fountain of sticky yellowed seed. It splattered across the puddle that was already building on the bathroom floor. Deo brought one paw down to squeeze and tug on his cock as he came, though he felt his ass fluttering around Yale.

The human inhaled sharply before he let out a scream of triumph. The werewolf's ass massaged and milked his cock, tugging and pulling his cock in as deep as it could go. There were a few fruitless undulations before Deo's body elicited the response it wanted. Yale's pretty face scrunched up in an orgasmic tangle of shock, joy and almost painful endorphins. His pearly white seed was jettisoned with all the force his physiology could muster, silky and smooth in contrast to those that had come before.

The two continued to move back and forth, though their momentum had lost its rhythm as they came. They clattered together in uneven intervals, an odd tangle of flesh and bone until Yale eventually fell back against the wall of the bathroom. Deo slowly backed up, pinning Yale to the wall, grinding his furry ass against the human's groin. Yale reached up to brush his long hair out of his face, still grinning. He looked Deo over, trying to decide just how big the orange werewolf was. Seven feet tall, maybe? Four hundred pounds possibly? And he'd maybe just expelled a gallon of cum onto the floor, a floor a very unlucky janitor would have to clean. As the two caught their breath, they listened to the muffled music of the party down the hall and around the corner.

"It's a bit crazy that it took us coming to a party for werewolves to realize the fun we could have together..." Yale said, leaning his head back against the tile, his chest still rising and falling in the desperate need for oxygen. He murmured slightly as Deo began shifting against him, the pounds shrinking away as his body began to pull back to a more human visage. In moments the fur that covered his ass and legs was merely ample body hair and his tattooed arm emerged as the fur retracted. His face pulled back into a human shape, although his wolf

ears remained atop his head and reddish-brown scruff shadowed his normally boyish face. One ear twitched, sending the golden earring hanging from it to dangle.

"For the record, I wanted to do this a long time ago; I just... didn't want to risk anything happening to you." Deo said before he straightened up. His tail slipped down Yale's leg and soon Yale felt Deo's hot, smooth back pressing against him. He wrapped his arms around the redhead and hugged him tight. Deo nuzzled his sweaty hair against the artist's face. Yale kissed him.

"I hope I'll be able to keep up with your hunger." Yale said. Deo grinned a bit, biting his bottom lip with his still elongated canine teeth.

"I'm sure you will, and maybe I'll get you so horny that you'll come sow your wild oats with me." Deo grinned. Yale's eyebrows arched a bit at that.

"You think I'd make a good playboy?" he asked.

"I think you could, but either way, I know whose bunk I'll be sleeping in tonight." Deo whispered. He thought about turning around to kiss Yale, but he didn't want the moment of their bonding to end. He knew Yale lacked the knot that werewolves gained, locking them to their partners, but in his mind he imagined that his beautiful, talented roommate had finally claimed him and knotted him and he had nowhere else to be but trapped on Yale's manhood. Yale, unaware of his roommate's fantasy, merely leaned down to kiss at Deo's neck and held him close, trying not to get distracted by the ache in his own neck.

While Echo Creek's historical mill had done its best to remain relevant in a more advanced age, the bulk of the building had been left to history. The upper floor held true to the past with framed pictures of the city founders and important events. There were woven displays of textiles that had been crafted with the mill power during part of its era as well as an assortment of grains pressed behind glass that would have been the envy of any 4H group at a state fair. Even a story up, the bass of the music filtered through the mill, vibrating the crystal goblet on the table before Atsu picked it up, bringing it to his lips. The liquid inside was far thicker than punch, the crimson darkening as it was exposed to the air. It was one beverage that did not do well to let breathe too long. Atsu turned his head, a pointed ear detecting the approach long before anyone reached the door. The vampire smiled slightly in appreciation.

"I had been hoping you would take me up on my offer, Marco. Please, do come in." Atsu called out. The door eased open and Marco entered. Atsu tilted his head slightly, "Your pack did not accompany you?" he asked.

"Should they have?" Marco asked. Atsu made a small noise.

"I would imagine not, but I often overestimate the instinct driving the wolves." Atsu commented, "May I offer you a drink? I know the selection downstairs was quite limited at the request of the Keepers, but I do have a fine vintage of sake if you are interested."

"I'm not much of a drinker I'm afraid. I came to get to know you better, mister Saeed." Marco explained. Atsu's lips pursed slightly as he gestured to a chair.

"And I you, though I do sense you are still a bit cautious at the moment." Atsu observed. Marco nodded, though he did move to sit down in the seat indicated.

"I have to admit, the party arrangements make me a bit nervous. There are no keepers here. All these werewolves gathered in one place, and not one keeper..." Marco said. Atsu held up a finger.

"Actually, there is one... That lovely deer boy brought a keeper as a date... That boy that smells of coffee." Atsu said in recollection.

"You know what I mean." Marco replied, "The keepers would normally be swarming all over this place. Did you hypnotize them not to come?" Marco asked. Atsu chuckled lightly at the back of his throat.

"Tychon did warn me that I have a tendency to come on too strong." Atsu admitted, "When I learned of this place and its Alpha guardian, my first inclination was to invite you to Dubai, to drive you out into the desert at night. We would feast on fine meats, fine wines beneath the stars as the tents rippled in the wind... But something told me that such a show would only unnerve you further. Besides, this is much more civilized. I get to see the young people I'm helping." Atsu said.

"From a distance, and you are evading my question." Marco said. Atsu looked the young man up and down, from his thick, bushy beard to his slight stomach, to the fine suit that he seemed somewhat uncomfortable wearing for the occasion.

"The keepers are around the perimeter. They are stationed at an interval of their choosing. Every concession, every beverage, every utensil was inspected by the head Keeper and her apprentice. They sealed off half a dozen doors and the balconies to ensure everyone was contained where they would be safe." Atsu explained, "My request for the evening was that I be able to provide a space where the guests felt they did not need bodyguards, at least close enough to see them. I wanted the guests to feel free to be themselves, to enjoy life, to be unafraid for once in these trying times." Atsu replied. Marco seemed to size him up, weighing his answer carefully before he posed the next question.

"What is in this for you?" Marco asked after a moment. An unnatural weariness tugged at the corner of Atsu's eyes as he finally lowered himself into his own seat.

"How much do you love your pack, Marco Iona?" Atsu asked with measured tones. Marco knew better than to accuse him of deflecting this time.

"More than I could have imagined possible." Marco said softly. Atsu nodded.

"And that's been, what, a year?" Atsu asked as he leaned back against his chair.

"A year and a half." Marco said. Atsu tried not to chuckle at how adorable it was to measure anything in such a small measure as half a year.

"Imagine how much that love would grow if you could share it with them for fifty years, for a hundred, for three hundred years... Sure, you may have squabbles, a bit of a tiff here and there... but imagine how much that love could grow in all that time." Atsu said softly, "And imagine if you started to lose it." Atsu exhaled slowly, looking down at the blood in his cup, "I want to foster the joys I felt, the love I felt, the hopefulness that sprouted from the cracks in the rock. Everything I have achieved is but vanity if I cannot improve lives for others."

"Is that the wisdom that has come from your extended lifespan?" Marco asked. Atsu looked up, his red eyes shrewd.

"I do not claim to be wise, but I do hope to be hopeful. Is it that surprising?" Atsu asked. Marco gave a sheepish smile.

"Maybe I will take a drink, if you have anything non-alcoholic." Marco said. Atsu smiled at that before he rose from his seat and moved over to a mini-fridge that had been set up along with the chairs. Marco's brow furrowed slightly, "Where is your familiar?"

"Tychon is serving the needs of the festivities. I figured he would enjoy interacting with others for a change. I am afraid I am not familiar with this selection. Is sparkling hibiscus acceptable?" Atsu asked.

"That sounds amazing, thank you." Marco said, accepting the chilled can. He opened it with a hiss before sipping at it, organizing his thoughts.

"You asked if it was surprising to me that you were hopeful. I suppose from my limited experience with the other side, it is." Marco admitted, "My Beta Artyom comes from a proud family of werewolves. We've heard about other families as well. They've lived generations in hiding from humans, fending off hunters. I was present for a terrorist attack against the werewolves myself. It is easy to have animosity when you're hunted."

"It is, too easy I am afraid... But it is hard to hold grudges when you have lived as long as I have. It is far easier to see the infinite possibility and potential in humanity. Look at how far they've advanced in the past few hundred years; technology, philosophy, gastronomy... and each human has the potential to become so much more; vampire, werewolf, kitsune... and in each breed, so many possibilities there as well."

"Forgive the young for they know not what they do?" Marco smiled. Atsu couldn't help but chuckle at that.

"Yes, yes... I was once young myself, many moons ago. But you, my friend, are an old soul in a young body. What do you intend to do with the time you are given?"

"I suppose I'll keep doing what I've been doing, trying to do the right thing and help as many people as I can." Marco replied.

"From the bottom of my heart, Marco Iona, I do hope to be an ally in that cause." Atsu said softly. Marco grinned slightly.

"I will hold you to that." Marco said.

"I would expect nothing less." Atsu said, sipping his sanguine once more.

The great migration back to campus had picked up as the party eventually began to wind down. Thackary felt a bit of relief as he walked with Curtis, though he found himself unable to look away as his brown haired boyfriend nibbled away on a wrap filled with incredibly bright pink flowers, red clover and fireweed - both edible plants he had been taught about as a keeper and neither part of anyone's typical diet. Thackary's smile only grew knowing that Curtis had filled his backpack with over a dozen of the floral wraps. Curtis' sky blue eyes looked up at Thackary curiously.

"What?" he asked, taking another bite of the wrap with a satisfying crunch.

"Nothing. I think it's kind of cute that you fit the image of the starving college student so well... and that you brought a backpack to a party to carry away the extra." Thackary grinned, reaching over to hit the crosswalk signal and begin the wait for the light to turn.

“Hey, if some rich guy went to the effort to have these made for me and I’m the only veggie eater at the party, he probably wanted me to have them. I’m just making sure nothing goes to waste.” Curtis said. Thackary just kept smiling, waiting for the light to turn, starting to wonder if they should have taken the foot bridge back to campus instead of the cross streets. As Curtis took another bite of his wrap and savored the unique flavors that his palate was uniquely suited to, he looked back at a figure standing four paces back, arms crossed as he seemingly waited at a respectful distance.

As Curtis focused on the figure, the shadow and darkness of the night seemed to peel back. Richer colors blossomed, both from the young man and the plants nestled in the chipped bark dust planters that lined the street. Curtis had tried to understand how werewolves sensed the world, but from what little literature existed, he knew his senses were far different. He could feel the vibrance of life, its moods and its colors... and the colors he saw were cold and lonely, longing, and uncertainty bordering on despair.

“Dathan, would you want to walk back to campus with us?” Curtis asked. Thackary looked a bit surprised at his boyfriend’s invitation. He had been aware that they were being followed and he had identified the vampire by the way he was so light on his feet. Still, Thackary’s mild disappointment at having a third wheel to their date evaporated as he saw Dathan shuffle out of the shadows, sinking his hands into his pockets. He seemed so meek and aloof, it was no doubt why Curtis had reached out with his big heart.

“You sure you guys don’t mind?” Dathan asked. Curtis smiled warmly.

“I feel like we got to know more about you tonight than we have in all the support group meetings. I feel like we could learn a lot more about each other and be better friends.” Curtis said. Thackary gave Curtis’ hand a squeeze as the light turned and they started forward. Dathan jogged slightly to close the distance between them, falling into step behind them by the time they were half way across the crosswalk.

“I don’t know how much there is to tell, but I don’t mind sharing. It’s kind of nice not having it all be some big secret.” Dathan said. Curtis glanced over his shoulder, smiling slightly as he saw new colors sprouting inside of Dathan already.

“That’s the first time I’ve seen someone drinking blood. Was it... good? Are there different vintages or blood types that are better than others?” Curtis asked. Dathan grinned a little, reaching up to brush his afro.

“Maybe, but I haven’t gotten that good at telling the difference yet. Blood is pretty much blood... although there’s a different tang to werewolf blood, and I’ve heard that some vampires try to sample all the different supers. Maybe someday.” Dathan said wistfully. Curtis smiled a bit bashfully as they reached the other side of the street and started moving along the south edge of campus.

“The movies make it look like terrible horror or the most intimate romance when a vampire feeds. Is it all Hollywood hype?” Curtis asked. Dathan grinned a bit more.

“Our fangs are precision instruments, and I think there’s something in the saliva that promotes healing... I mean, it probably could be either, but I really want to make any feedings I do a spiritual, intimate experience. There are ways to bring a lot of pleasure to those kind enough to share their essence with me.” Dathan said. Thackary opened his mouth to say something, but he winced as Curtis beat him to the punch.

"Maybe we could give it a try sometime. Could be a fun experience." Curtis said. Thackary's eyes closed as he kept walking. It was one thing to take pity on the lonely vampire, but to serve yourself up on a platter?

"That'd be amazing! I promise I'll be careful and gentle and I'll make it really special." Dathan said before looking up at Thackary, "And you're welcome too! I mean, if you wanted to, or if you just wanted to, uh, watch or something?"

"You're making it sound worse." Thackary said, looking back at the vampire who was in one moment behind them and in the next he wasn't. Thackary looked forward again to see Dathan walking backwards, his arms crossed behind his head.

"Hey, can't blame a bat for trying, especially when he smells so sweet and you smell like coffee so good it could wake the dead." Dathan said.

"I swear, I took a shower after work..." Thackary said.

"I like the smell." Curtis said, leaning over to nuzzle his head against Thackary's shoulder affectionately. Dathan tilted his head.

"You ever come close to poking your eye out when he's got his antlers on display?" Dathan asked. Thackary gave a strained smile.

"A keeper has to be prepared for anything at a moment's notice." Thackary said. Dathan made an o-shape with his mouth.

"That's right, it takes a special kind of human to catch the deer. What kind of magic do you have?" Dathan asked.

"What if I were to make ya trip?" Thackary asked, a dangerous grin crossing his lips.

"Do you really think you're fast enough to- shit!" Dathan cursed as he stumbled, taking a moment to realize he had backed over a portion of the sidewalk that had arched up as tree roots displaced the cement. He glanced back at the human with a grin betraying his fangs, "That doesn't count, cheater!" Thackary just shrugged.

"Gotta use the tools at my disposal." Thackary replied. Curtis just smirked before taking another big bite of his floral pita wrap, letting out groans of satisfaction as his teeth munched through the red clover and fireweed.

The life of a keeper had never been an easy one, a lesson that Ren Sekimori had learned from an early age. While she had tried to specialize in the social mechanics side of protecting the secret of lycanthropy and the safety of her town, there were times where one had to pull on a jacket, go out in the dead of night come rain or shine and get the work done. Ren had taken up position on the line around the mill, standing in a particularly scenic spot where she could see the main entrance, the creek as it passed through the water wheels and a particularly nice stretch of green space complete with a winter orchid in shades of ivory and pink. As cold as she was, at least there was a great view.

Ren's fingers traced gently through the air, a faint shimmer of pearl colored energy becoming visible for only a moment before it faded away into imperceptibility again. While her honey colored eyes remained fixed on the entrance to the mill, she did afford herself a chance to wonder idly if shield building had always been in her family line. After all, her surname did

translate to barrier keeper. Ren inhaled slightly as she listened carefully to her surroundings. She heard pressurized water being sprayed into plastic buckets. Silas and Riku had taken on the unenviable task of cleaning up the mill's facilities in order to restore the space to the condition it had been loaned to them in. Another sound, however, forced her immediate attention.

A shadow blotted out the moonlight above the mill, a shape only visible by the stars it obscured. Ren tracked the movement as the dark object descended, dropping to the ground with a tremendous velocity before massive leathery wings unfurled, the cushion of air suspending the creature for a moment before dangerously taloned feet touched down, one foot releasing a small bundle of cloth. Ashen colored fur rippled in the night breeze, nostrils in a spade shaped nose inhaling and exhaling. The limited light glistened off dangerous fangs curling out of the bat's muzzle before crimson eyes turned, regarding the keeper. Despite the muzzle, a clear smile quirked as the beast folded his wings around himself.

"I must thank you for not flinching. Many do not respond to my presence with such calm." Atsu said, his red eyes closing and his pointed ears flattening against his head before his body began to shrink. Muscles contracted, bones tightened and the gray fur seemed to sink into his olive toned skin. Atsu's luxurious mane of curly black hair grew back out as his ears descended back to their rightful position. Ren's eyebrow arched, realizing Atsu's red eyed flight had cost him the opportunity to be dressed; his bare pectorals and stomach catching the limited moonlight.

"It is easy to brace oneself when you know something is coming." Ren replied before giving a slight shrug, "Plus I am not alone." she said. Atsu looked up, red eyes widening slightly at the realization that there was another man just behind Ren, his hazel eyes locked square on Atsu, a rather peculiar looking crossbow leveled at him for a moment before he lowered it. His dusty blond hair was pulled well clear of his face.

"Not only a keeper, but a hunter as well? What an eclectic group you have assembled, Miss Sekimori. I am most impressed." Atsu said, bending down to collect the cloth he had dropped, pulling it up to reveal a robe of sorts that he soon pulled on over his shoulders.

"Has the evening gone as you hoped?" Ren asked. It was nothing new for her to be around naked men. Given her profession she had endured werewolves indulging their instincts or recovering from injuries since she'd been old enough to wrap a roll of gauze. Atsu gestured back towards the mill.

"The party is coming to a close. I feel it was a complete success and the start of something new and wonderful." Atsu said, his accent as refined as ever, "And I must thank you for allowing it to happen so far out of your comfort zone." he added. Ren allowed a small smile.

"Keepers must remain adaptable. I no longer have to keep the secret of the werewolves, only their safety and well being. You made a good point that their emotional well being can grow from feeling as though they can be themselves in a safe space." Ren said.

"Not to mention the fact that you're bank rolling all of the security initiatives in town." Auel added. Atsu grinned a bit.

"I hope you don't think I'm just throwing money around to have my way." Atsu said. Ren's smile shifted, an almost invisible edge to it.

“If I believed you had any malice towards my pack, you would not have made it this far.” she said simply. Atsu made a slight noise of appreciation.

“A fair and noble response.” Atsu said before gesturing to the mill, “Perhaps we can debrief about the experience inside where it is warm? I have a selection of teas to choose from.”

“It wouldn’t be right for me to leave my position, at least not yet. I would offer to come inside when the last of your guests have departed but I know that dawn is approaching. I could send Atsu to bring you some warmer clothes?” Ren offered. Atsu shook his head.

“I enjoy the cold. It makes me feel... alive.” Atsu said after pondering his word choice for a moment. The red slowly drained from his eyes until they were a rich bronzy brown.

“And are you on a quest to feel alive, mister Saeed?” Ren asked. Atsu grinned, his fangs still slightly visible.

“In our own way, aren’t we all? From the college students letting loose to the reformed hunter carving his path into the world with the blade he once used for ill?” Atsu asked, “I can only promise you that my quest is for all of us to live the best lives we can. I have traveled the world trying to help how I can. I have gathered healing knowledge from the Cernos, from keepers the world over. I have helped ensure precious resources like the lotus blossom and moonstone reach their destinations without government oversight. I only wish to help those in need.”

His words sounded sincere, well meant, and some of it Ren had corroborated before letting Atsu invest in Echo Creek in the first place... but it was her nature to be suspicious, to be doubtful, to keep a wary edge. Everything had meaning and purpose even if the person conducting the acts was not conscious of them. Even Atsu’s midnight flight had been unnecessary. To him it may have merely been stretching his muscles, but he knew he would transform naked. He knew there was a chance to startle her, he had even commented on that fact when he had landed. After a lifetime of keeping everything so close to the vest, it was hard to let people in... but sometimes that was a calculated risk.

“I think I have changed my mind. It would be nice to go inside and have some warm tea. Auel, you will hold the fort down for me?” Ren asked. Auel smiled, trying not to let too much malicious mirth show in his eyes.

“Yes ma’am.” he answered, still watching Atsu. To Ren’s surprise, the vampire offered her his smooth and supple arm. She tilted her head slightly before looping her arm in his.

“After all these years, I do not think a single one of my wolves has been so gentlemanly.” Ren commented. Atsu practically purred.

“Then I am honored to break with tradition.” he said, walking with her up the slight incline back towards the mill. Auel remained behind, his eyes not leaving the vampire until he had disappeared back into the building with Ren.

One by one, the lights snapped off as Trevor Halyard finally made his way down the hallway of the Admissions building. It had been another long night in a long week. Admission applications had skyrocketed after Echo Creek’s announcement and each case required extra scrutiny. Trevor finally got to the front door, stepping out and pulling it shut behind him. The door

was a bit heavy, though it sealed with a satisfying click as he locked it, turning back around. Grand Mesa wasn't exactly a party school, but thanks to the party it felt like a ghost town. Even when there was a beating heart to the campus, the admissions building was about as far away as one could get. One advantage to being at the farthest edge of campus was that parking generally thinned out by the time he finished work.

A few leaves danced across the asphalt, collecting at the edges of the raised cement planter beds. The sounds of the fountain cascaded in the distance. Trevor reached up to rub at his arms a bit, trying to bring heat to them, although he slowed a bit as he got about half way to his car. The forty-six year old's chest rose and fell with each breath, the moonlight catching in the silver streaks in his otherwise red hair. Green eyes began to take on a greenish-gold tinge like oxidized copper.

For a long moment, Trevor wasn't sure what had set his senses off. After all, it had been years since he'd done anything other than administrative work, but the smell... There was the smell of ichor on the wind. It smelled stale and slick, tainted. The points of Trevor's ears began to stretch into points, rusty red fur starting to prickle out from the backsides as his fingernails stretched into sharp ivory claws. The guidance counselor had been still from the moment he had sensed danger, but he spun in a fluid motion and brought his hand up just as a clawed paw came slashing down.

There was a crackle of electricity that snapped through the air. The light only illuminated the dark contrast of the hulking figure towering over Trevor. It stood ponderously on two massive legs, black fur dripping with blood. It looked emaciated with ribs poking out through skin covered with so little fur it might as well have been velvet. Its foot paws were tipped with deadly claws but the joints of the toe knuckles and ankles were bulbous, connected by visible tendons beneath crepe paper skin. Even its head was a mockery of the sublime form of werewolves Trevor had come to know. It was narrow and sharp, fangs so big they didn't fit in the narrow muzzle. Red eyes gleamed from the darkness as the creature blinked a few times, trying to adjust to what had just happened. Trevor, however, was having a harder time adjusting. He shook his head in disbelief.

"There aren't supposed to be any more direwolves..." Trevor murmured, backing up slowly. He hadn't expected the monster to respond, he hadn't even expected to say it out loud. The creature, however, turned to analyze the retreat the guidance counselor was attempting. Again it charged, claws scraping on the asphalt. Trevor took in a breath, moving his hands around as if he was swinging something on a long string. As he came around, the air seemed to ripple, crackle, and then ignite suddenly.

Another crack snapped in the air as the direwolf was hit in the stomach with a bolt of blue fire. The air shimmered behind Trevor as a set of three orange tails emerged from the air, tugging the gap between his pants and shirt apart to make room. Whiskers poked out from his cheeks as his hands darkened with new pigment. The ears sticking out from the side of his head slipped up through his hair, rising to prominence on the top of his head. Trevor panted a little, but he looked at the direwolf, now crouching in a three point stance back on the sidewalk.

"I can't begin to imagine what you've been through, nor how hard it has been..." Trevor said, holding out a hand towards the wounded beast, "But I want to understand, and I want to help you." Trevor said soothingly, "You've come to a place that embraces those that are

different. I know it may seem like the fang clan has no allies, but I assure you that if you-” Trevor’s words fell to a sudden stillness as he felt the strange heat searing inside of his stomach. He hadn’t even blinked, but in less than a moment the direwolf had disappeared from where he had been crouching a good twenty feet away to standing right in front of his prey.

Trevor looked down slowly, expecting to see one of the monster’s claws piercing his abdomen. What he saw instead was much, much worse. He saw some sort of translucent red blade extending out from a blossoming bloody stain in his shirt. The direwolf’s paw was wrapped around a carved hilt made of the same material as the blade. The stone seemed to be glowing an ever brighter red, almost as if it was heating up. Trevor looked down at it, though a strained sound escaped his lips. It wasn’t from his lungs being compromised, or even from the pain. It came as a stiffness began crackling through his body.

“You attacked the boy...” Trevor forced, wincing as his fox ears pulled back into his head and his human ears returned. He grunted with more pain as his three tails began to retract, the fur shedding and dissolving into the wind. A short crackle of electricity danced across the crystal knife blade, disappearing into the creature’s paw... a paw that was now tipped with silver claws instead of black. Even its blood soaked black fur was looking more vibrant. It was as if the sun was rising and the dawn light was turning the dark fur into shades of brown, then orange.

Trevor’s whiskers disappeared, then his claws. He looked up at the monster, though his vision blurred as the greenish-gold light faded from it. Trevor suddenly felt so very old, so very tired, and so very human... His breaths were short and shallow. His knees felt weak, so weak that he couldn’t even manage to stand. As he started to fall forward, one of the monster’s claws came up behind him, slowing his descent. Trevor didn’t know if it was out of some fragment of compassion, or merely a way to keep him on the blade longer.

“It’s not too late for you...” Trevor wheezed, looking up with eyes that could no longer see, “You don’t have to hurt anyone... after... me...” Trevor managed before he went limp, his limbs unceremoniously splayed on the parking lot of the school he had worked at for so many years. A hot, wet breath blasted through the nostrils of a nose that was changing, longer whiskers poking out from a broadening muzzle. Orange fur crept up the back of the direwolf’s ears before he pulled the knife from the old man’s gut. The creature looked down at the human, stripped of his supernatural side.

For a moment, he lingered... perhaps even longer than he had intended to. He had hunted before, but no one had ever tried to save him as they were dying. Why had this one old man tried? Was it a psychological trick meant to haunt him? Was it a side effect of the blade forming some sort of connection between them? The monster shook his head, flinging some of the residue from his bloody transformation from his fur before he turned, looking around. There had been no witnesses, but even in the middle of the night, it wouldn’t be long before someone else came along. The direwolf returned the crystal blade to a sheath on his waist before he dropped to all fours, pushed off and bounded off into the night. After a few strides, he was moving so fast that he blended into the shadows, disappearing as easily as an after image.

The sound of scuffling feet and mild laughter carried up through the chain link enclosure of the footbridge as Marco led his pack up the incline. The weather had been clearing up the last few nights, although all that meant in Echo Creek was that the wind was biting cold. Marco's dark hair whipped around, though his bushy beard seemed to ripple in waves. Marco could feel the cold creeping in every seam of his suit jacket, though his body produced enough heat to fend it off - another perk of being a Tanuki he supposed.

Part of Marco wanted to just let loose and brandish his striped tail, to feel his claws and paw pads on the ice cold path, but it was late and they were almost home. Marco contented himself with listening to Fletcher and Udo laughing just behind him, comparing notes from the party. Yom strolled at a more leisurely pace at the back of the pack, his arms arched behind his head despite the fact that he was walking. Duncan seemed to be sizing Yom up, looking at where his cummerbund had ridden up, nearly exposing the flesh beneath. There was a soft smile on Marco's lips as he reflected upon how well the evening had gone, though the smile started to slip as they approached the highest point of the foot bridge.

The lack of clouds had made it harder to see at first, but there was an oscillating aura of red and blue faintly shining on the gym building that sat at the far end of the foot bridge. Marco's eyes took on a faintly purple sheen as he traced the path they would have taken, then slipped it northward towards the faculty parking lot. Marco came to a stop, Udo and Fletcher nearly slamming into him. All eyes drifted to the same anchor point. A cluster of emergency vehicles had surrounded the admissions building. There was an ambulance, a fire truck, and three police cars. Officers were already spreading out police tape at the entrances to the lot.

Marco felt his stress tighten in his stomach like a dense, jagged rock that cut everything on its way down. They had gone to the party assuming the threat would be there, but while they had been gone, something else had happened... Marco's fingers tightened, cutting into his palms. He wanted to feel the heat of his anger, to feel the boiling rage, but all he felt was the icy wind cutting into him.

"We couldn't have been everywhere at once..." Artyom said, his deep voice so low that it was barely audible.

"I know." Marco muttered softly, "I know that we've been doing our best, but that isn't good enough." Marco said.

"The police aren't going to let a gang of meddling werewolves press into their investigation. We should get back to the dorm room, contact Ren and our social networks and see what people know." Udo said. Marco nodded numbly. He knew Udo was right, even if he wanted to charge down into the crime scene and see for himself. What if they missed something? What if the trail went cold? What if it took enhanced senses to discover the truth? But he wasn't a werewolf anymore... He wasn't the famed Alpha that had faced off Demeas and looked into a tear in reality itself. He was something else, something new... Marco couldn't afford to keep focusing on the past. It was time to learn the full extent of his abilities and to use them as tools. They were going to get to the bottom of this before anyone else got hurt.