

LYKOS

THIRD AGE

Chapter 14 (Crossing the Line)

Irregular pops and dings sounded from the engine of the old truck as it cooled down from its long adventure up to the top of Grand Mesa. The sunset had been beautiful, but the aftermath was even more breathtaking. The entire horizon looked as if it was lit on fire by ruby and citrine hues while the heavens had the faintest haze of violet as the stars emerged in abundance. Thackary gazed out at the view with true wonder. The way the keeper drank it all in like a man dying of thirst brought a smile to Curtis' lips, making him feel as though his idea for a date had been perfect, even if his toes felt like icicles. He leaned back on the bench seat, slinging an arm behind his shaggy mop of hair.

"I thought werewolf keepers would be used to being out in the wild." Curtis commented with a wry smile. Thackary looked back, his dark blue eyes twinkling a bit with his grin.

"Most are, but I'm lucky enough that my job specialty makes me most valuable where the people are." Thackary said, softening a little, "That's what makes this extra special. Thank you." he said. Curtis smiled a bit warmly before he leaned forward and opened the bag he'd brought, digging through before producing a green glass bottle and two plastic cups.

"You treated me to a special drink back at the shop, I wanted to bring you something special. Dandelion wine." Curtis offered. Thackary looked a little surprised.

"I remember reading a story about dandelion wine once but I didn't think anyone actually did it." Thackary said. Curtis' smile took on a tinge of pride.

"It's a Cernos delicacy, home made." he said, managing to extract the cork and start pouring the liquid despite the curtain of wavy hair hanging over his face. He filled the plastic cup about half way before handing it over to Thackary before pouring his own, carefully setting the bottle down to be re-corked once they weren't trying to juggle so many things.

"Cheers." Thackary said, holding his plastic cup out. Curtis gave it a playful tap with his own cup, taking a good strong swallow. Thackary brought the cup to his lips and took a sip, his eyes widening a little as unexpected flavors bloomed in his mouth. The taste was only slightly bitter, balanced thankfully by a honey-like sweetness. All of that Thackary could deal with, but the wine had an undeniably musty flavor that bordered on what one might consider to be an sickly-sweet mildew. Thackary backed off and hazarded a sniff, confirming the aroma to be just that. It was simultaneously repugnant and alluring, sort of like how some people liked smelly cheeses. It also would have masked a dozen of the poisons Thackary routinely used. Curtis looked at how hard Thackary was studying his cup before chuckling a little nervously.

"I guess it must be an acquired taste, sorry." he said. Thackary looked over, eyes widening in surprise before he shook his head.

"No, it's..." Thackary paused. He had been about to say great out of reflex, though that certainly wasn't honest. He changed gears and smiled, "It's a taste I want to acquire." he amended. Curtis visibly relaxed at that, his shoulders sinking down a little in relief.

"I'm glad we could do this before the big party thing." Curtis added. Thackary nodded and leaned back against the bench seat.

"Me too. It's nice to get to know you one on one. I didn't even know Cernos existed until this semester started." Thackary said. Curtis smiled faintly at that.

"There aren't many of us... I think of all the weres I've heard about, we have the lowest population. I guess we spook too easy." Curtis shrugged. Thackary laughed.

"You're really good with those deer jokes." Thackary said.

"What can I say, I try to be charming." he smiled. Thackary looked into Curtis' eyes, at least what he could see of them. They were like placid pools of ice blue water.

"It's working." Thackary said softly. Curtis smiled a bit more warmly at that, holding Thackary's gaze for a moment longer until he looked at the floor. Thackary looked suddenly concerned.

"What is it?" he asked gently. Curtis gave a mild shrug, looking half way up again.

"I haven't shown anyone my other side yet, at least no one that didn't already know." he admitted. Thackary shook his head.

"You don't have to rush it, this is our first date, we can go at whatever pace you want. Honestly, this is new territory for me. Werewolf keepers aren't supposed to date the pack. Too much risk of getting turned. I'm guessing that's not a problem with Cern-" Thackary was cut off as Curtis grabbed the keeper's head and pulled him into a kiss. It felt like an electric charge ripped through Thackary's body. As silly as it was, the mere fact that he was kissing another man thrilled him to the point that the hair was standing up on the back of his neck. His occupation made it easy to forget that he was barely twenty years old and that he didn't even have as much education as the students going to GMU. The idea that Curtis was something else was merely icing on the cake.

"What if I want to rush it?" Curtis asked once their kiss broke, looking up at Thackary with doe eyes. Thackary gave a faint grin.

"There's an inflatable mattress in the bed of the truck..." he murmured. Curtis let out a soft whistle.

"You really are prepared for anything, aren't you?" he asked, setting his wine cup onto the dashboard before resting his hand on Thackary's thigh. This time nothing was going to divert his gaze.

Silas had been smiling so much that his face was starting to hurt, but how could he stop? It felt as though he was floating in a cloud - or more accurately, in a flock of fluffy sheep. He still couldn't believe that Auel had been so generous. The warm glow spilling out of the show windows of Faulkner's Cove sports shop didn't do the burgundy coat justice, but even if it was too dark to marvel at the color, it felt like heaven. The interior was lined with extra thick cream colored fleece. The hood was just the right size so the fleece constantly massaged and warmed his cheeks and the red headed sophomore had been hugging himself since he put the coat on. It was the second happiest moment in his life, right behind his supernatural recovery from spastic paraplegia.

As Auel and Silas reached the cross walk and waited for the light to turn, Silas looked down at the curved slope of the street corner and the beaded metal plate affixed to it. He'd spent years in a wheelchair, navigating around cities. Even when they tried to comply with ADA law, even simple weathering could turn a compliant sidewalk into a navigational nightmare. Even a year after his recovery, it was hard not to think about what had happened. He'd been exposed to lycanthropy by accident. The change had forced his body to attack itself. He had technically died, been reborn as a direwolf and then had been saved from being trapped in that life forever. For a few months he'd been stuck with wolf traits and then, finally, he'd been able to resume a semi-normal life... more normal than he'd ever expected.

"Silas, are you alright?" Auel asked, a few steps into the crosswalk. Silas inhaled sharply, looking up to see the crosswalk was already flashing red. He nodded silently and pushed forward, his exhalation turning to vapor in the cool air.

"I'm more than fine. I-" Silas said as he caught up to Auel, looking up at him with a sidelong gaze. Auel always looked so cool with his dusty tan hair brushed back, his hazel eyes so thoughtful. He was tall and strong and confident. "I still can't believe you bought this for me, it cost a fortune!"

"It isn't like I'm using my pay for much. I'm kind of surprised the city wants the keepers on a payroll now." Auel said with a smile as they reached the other street corner. Silas stopped, his lips pursing into a small smile. Auel turned to look at him, an eyebrow arching in confusion as if he wasn't certain what else was going on with his red headed companion. Silas stood up on his tip toes and kissed the older man on the lips. Auel's hazel eyes went wide for a moment in surprise, a blush coloring his cheeks. He was practically ten years older than Silas, but the warmth in his chest reminded him of young love. Auel's eyes slowly closed and he returned the kiss, the moment lingering until the whoosh of cars rumbling by shook them back to reality.

"Thank you." Silas said softly, licking his lips a little to savor the taste, "You taste like water." he considered after a moment. Auel gave a sheepish grin.

"I'll take that as a compliment?" he smiled softly. It was certainly something they would have to explore, but they had time. Auel put his left hand on the small of Silas' back and walked with him. It was a good five or six blocks from the downtown area to the museum, then a curving gravel path through the decorative mounds of bark dust, boulders and old trees. In the daytime Auel found the rich red wood shell of the museum to be quite comforting. Even in the dark, the asymmetrical rectangles created a distinct outline, but as they approached there was something oddly fluid on the shapes, something organically drawn, something freeform...

Auel stopped, his gentle hand on Silas' back grasping the red coat and tugging him to a stop as well. It had been over a year since Auel had given up his life as a hunter, but his instincts were still strong. His nostrils widened, his eyes dilated. Silas opened his mouth to say something but instead he gasped slightly, a golden hue tingeing his eyes as they shifted slightly. As his light sensitivity increased, the unwelcome addition to the museum came into focus. There was a crude graffiti depiction of a wolf head with horns on it next to hand scrawled letters spelling out 'Monster Lover'.

"Do you smell anyone?" Auel asked, barely more than a whisper. Silas inhaled a bit more, his ears pushing to points in his hood as rusty red hairs bristled out of his cheeks to form thick sideburns. He sniffed a few more times before shaking his head.

“Nothing fresh, but there are unfamiliar smells.” Silas said. Auel grimaced a little. Foot traffic had picked up at the museum since Echo Creek had declared itself a sanctuary city. It would be impossible to separate out visitors from vandals. Auel considered telling Silas to go to the school where there was safety in numbers, but he knew that sending him alone was just as risky and that Silas wouldn’t have listened anyway.

“Keep your guard up.” Auel said instead. Silas reached up to lower his hood, allowing his pointed ears to pull in the full range of sound around the museum. The two advanced, step by step - at least until Auel impacted an unseen barrier that rippled suddenly into iridescent light. A rather severe looking Hispanic man stepped out, hand raised. Even in the dim lighting, the chrome gauges in his stretched out ears and the spikes on either side of his lower lip glinted. A dark mustache and soul patch contrasted with his adobe toned skin.

“Mattias, what happened?” Auel asked, recognizing one of the city’s main keepers.

“Not sure yet, we’re still checking things out.” Mattias said, closing his eyes and exhaling slowly as he moved his hands. A bubble of light over the museum became visible, fading away only in the portion between Auel and Mattias. Silas rushed forward, Auel following after. As they advanced, Mattias focused again and moved his hands, muttering under his breath. The gap in the bubble closed itself before the shield became invisible once more. Auel looked around, spotting Riku at the corner of the building. He guessed there had to be at least four keepers if not more.

“Is Ren alright?” Silas asked. Mattias nodded.

“She is unusually calm about it. I think she’s making something to restore the wood finish when we get the paint off?” Mattias said. Auel’s brow furrowed a bit as he moved to head inside. Silas trudged after him, shoes scuffing through the gravel path.

Moonlight spilled across the mesa, supplemented by a camping lantern that Thackary had propped up on the corner of the truck bed. The bleach blond keeper sat on the tailgate of the truck, watching Curtis. The country boy had moved a few paces out from the truck, reluctantly taking a hold of his shirt before he tugged it off. The skin beneath was well tanned and relatively flawless. Thackary shivered just looking at him.

“Are you sure you won’t get cold?” he asked. Curtis grinned a little, running a hand up and down his sternum.

“I’m already cold, but I have a plan on how to get warm again.” Curtis said before he closed his eyes and tipped his head back. The trailing edge of his long wavy hair trickled its way down his neck before it brushed his shoulders. Curtis stood there in the chill air, slowly bringing his arms out to his sides. At first Thackary wasn’t sure what was going to happen, but as he watched there was a faint sheen forming across Curtis’ skin. It started between his pectorals, but then it began to dust its way down across his navel and into his pants. His forearms began to shine as well, then his chin.

Thackary leaned forward, his lap still bundled up in a comforter, his eyes focusing as best they could to figure out just what was catching the light. It took a moment for him to realize that the light was catching on fine invisible hairs that were emerging from Curtis’ body. The

glimmer faded as brownish pigment colored the fur on his forearms and chin, a softer beige coloring filling in the patch on his chest and the trail down his stomach. Curtis tilted his head one way, then the other, his ears quirking as they began to stretch and distort, elongating. The flesh became thinner, covered with a velvet down as they folded a little. One ear twitched independently of the other.

So far the transformation had been peaceful, even serene, as if Curtis was one with nature. Thackary sensed the shift, however, as Curtis' face began to tighten in discomfort. His jaw clenched and his eyes tightened. Thackary wasn't sure what was happening at first until two lumps began to push through his mop of wavy hair. The flesh was red and irritated, distorting and distending, stretching more and more. Curtis grunted, gritting his teeth, breathing shallower. The lumps grew larger, pushing out farther, stretching and stretching until the flesh couldn't take any more. The skin suddenly parted as two bony nubs burst forth and Curtis let out an exultant grunt, a small wet spot forming in his pants from a rush of precum.

What had been pensive silence became almost indulgent moaning. Curtis ran his left hand up to pinch and rub his nipple as the boney nubs pushed out further and further, extruding from his skull. They curved out and away from his head, unspooling from some mystical source. The forming horns twisted and curved as they pushed out, forking and splitting as they went. Half of the shape came from the way it pushed out of his head, the other half growing unnaturally from antler that had already been exposed to the air.

The sharp prongs looked sharp and dangerous, a contrast to the velvety soft fur braces around his forearms, the pillow like thicket on his chest, the tuft on his chin, and as Thackary studied Curtis, the almost shawl-like coating of fur across his shoulders. Curtis shifted his weight, panting harder and harder, moaning louder as his antlers split into three points and then finally four. He fumbled with the button to his jeans as his fingernails darkened to black, growing thick and firm. He murmured in frustration until he gave up on the button entirely and tugged his pants down, revealing an achingly hard cock coated in precum.

Curtis strained and writhed before he turned, forcing Thackary to gasp with amazement as he saw that the country boy's perfect bubble butt was now covered in brown fur, the cheeks parted to reveal a pulsating rubbery black ring glistening with moisture of its own beneath a flicking, twitching, oddly inviting deer tail. The air shifted and Thackary was hit with a musky aroma that reminded him of the dandelion wine, but he knew it was coming from Curtis, from that irresistible pucker, from those Cernos scent glands, from a deer in heat that needed a strong buck to fuck him deep and hard and now.

Thackary let out a soft moan of his own as he lunged from the truck, nearly tripping over the comforter that had been on his lap. He all but tackled Curtis, knocking him down onto the dirt and the scrub brush. Curtis let out a surprised moan as he threw his head back and let out a moan. The keeper anxiously tore at his own pants, getting his button loose and his fly undone, tugging his underwear down and releasing his pent up erection. His shaft landed with a faint slap between Curtis' furry cheeks. Thackary slid it up and down, shivering at how good it felt, but he trembled as the fattening head of his cock traced across the almost oily, warm rubbery entrance to his partner's rear end.

"Fuck me, stud... I need you so bad..." Curtis moaned. Thackary felt power and purpose surge through him. His lips curled with determination before he thrust his hips forward, driving

his manhood into the tight, warm, pulsating embrace. Thackary braced himself with his left arm on Curtis's shoulder, but his other arm reached around his partner's furry hip, his fingers gliding through the velvety coating until he found Curtis' dick. His fingers curled around the shaft, awkwardly at first, but soon falling into a rhythm. Every time he thrust in, his hand came crashing down to the root of the deer's dick. When he pulled back, the hand slid up. It was as if Curtis was the middle of a fuck sandwich, getting pounded on both sides.

Curtis moaned and writhed, his back arching as he bucked forward and back with irresistible need. His deer tail tickled Thackary's stomach, his antlers came close to poking the keeper, but their passions could not be contained. The brown fur trickled down further along Curtis' back, tapering off into a faint v-shape. Faint speckles colored his cheeks, but the most disturbing change came from his shoes. The well worn synthetic leather writhed and contorted, twisting before they were pushed off by an unseen growing mass beneath. As the shoes tugged themselves off, furry ankles were revealed. The collar of the shoe actually tore as a pair of dark dewclaws tore their way free.

Fused toes scraped their way through dirt and across stone, virgin keratin hooves getting scuffed by the rough treatment as the calcium rich material extruded out from Curtis' animalistic feet. Curtis loved how hard Thackary was fucking him, how deep his cock reached, and especially that he was thoughtful enough for a reach around, but his transformation was causing just as much ecstasy. A drop of drool escaped Curtis' lip as he felt the keeper's balls slapping his taint, the impact of his hips eliciting the excretion of sebum from his scent glands, coating the human in the telltale musk that would tell any Cernos that he fucked a deer boy.

Thackary's moans were becoming more surprised and desperate, inhaling deeper as he felt that he wasn't entirely in control of fucking Curtis. Curtis' ass seemed to have a mind of its own, muscles tugging inward, drawing and massaging his cock, pulling at it, practically trying to milk him. Thackary all but screamed as he thrust in as deep as he could go and Curtis' ass tugged even harder. Thackary's stabilizing arm nearly slipped so instead he grabbed onto one of Curtis' proud antlers. Curtis' eyes snapped open, gleaming an intense and pure silver as he let out a triumphant shout.

The sound of something wet splattering against rock caught the edges of Thackary's ears. It was just a quick squirt or two at first, but then Curtis came like a faucet. Eerily thick pearly white cum poured out of his cock, splashing across the dirt and stone, collecting in a puddle beneath them both. To Thackary's surprise, Curtis' cock seemed to stretch longer and longer as he came, adding on an inch, then two, then three. It slipped through his tight grip, adding on a good five inches before it finally settled down - the growth and the orgasm subsiding at the same time.

While Curtis had crashed over the edge, it seemed that Thackary was close behind. The spasms of Curtis' afterglow translated into a few more furtive tugs from his ass muscles. Thackary all but melted across Curtis, leaning his face down into the shawl of deer fur across his shoulders, breathing his earthy peaty scent in and out. Thackary exhaled slowly as he came, not in a sudden deluge, but in a euphorically blissful steady stream. It was as if the deer's anatomy had worked towards the single purpose of making Thackary cum as much and as long and as evenly as possible. His dark blue eyes glazed over as he came so long that it felt like he

was peeing, but his semen was pooling deep inside of Curtis' abdomen. Curtis closed his silver eyes, a smile of both contentment and triumph crossing his lips.

The faint ticking of an old hexagonal wood framed clock filled the otherwise stillness of Ren's office. Steam wafted up from the reddish-brown tea poured into the heavy ceramic cups, smelling of rose petals and citrus. It seemed absurd that it was Ren making them hot tea when it was her home, her family legacy, her bastion of history that had been attacked. Auel's fingers tightened until they began to dig into his palms.

"How can you be so calm about this?" Auel's question broke the quiet. Ren looked up with a sad smile.

"From the moment we announced ourselves, I have been anticipating this, or something worse. Beyond that, I run a museum about the mistreatment and othering of individuals, remember?"

"So you expected it... and what? What if this is just the start? We drew a line in the sand and they stepped over it. I know you're big on history, but this isn't some organized government movement. They're bigots, they're individuals." Auel said. Ren nodded slowly.

"You are right that something will have to be done, but it will have to be done carefully. What we do here, what we don't do, it all sends a message. We have to hold ourselves to the highest standards." Ren said. Auel shook his head slowly.

"I have no idea how you did it all those years, keeping the secret, checking and double checking every choice. I guess I'm going to have to be a quick learner. I need to go for a walk." Auel said. Silas straightened up in his chair and started reaching for his burgundy jacket. Auel hesitated slightly, "I... I need to be alone for a while. Sorry." he muttered. Silas shrank back but nodded weakly. Auel left Ren's office and a few moments later the front door of the museum. Silas' green eyes fell to the floor.

"He'll be alright once he cools down." Ren said softly. Silas shook his head.

"It isn't that, I-" Silas hesitated, "I'm feeling selfish. Today was going so well, and this happened, and I'm just thinking about how it ruined everything... for me." he admitted, "I'm sorry, I know that's terrible." Despite his admission, Ren smiled a little.

"Don't be sorry. I'm glad things were going well before this. You've come a long way Silas Foster. It seems like only yesterday you were a stray I took in." She smiled. Silas couldn't help but grin a little at that.

"Sometimes I still miss the wolf ears." he smirked.

"I do too, it made it very easy to read your emotions." Ren smiled, lifting her cup to take a sip. She closed her eyes and took one long breath in and then let it out slowly, "Tomorrow we'll clean the graffiti off, restore the wood and talk with the others about how we'll respond to such things. If they are looking to provoke us, we don't want to justify their actions." Ren said. Silas' lips tightened a little.

"What if they want something else?" he asked. Ren gave a slight shrug of her shoulders.

"Then we study our enemy and learn how to live despite them, as we have always done." Ren replied.

Winter was often an ally of a hunter. The wet ground made it easy for prey to leave tracks. Leafless trees hid no broken branches. There had been enough to follow, but the limited amount of evidence leading away from the museum gave Auel pause. Whoever had vandalized the building had not been amateurs. They had not used vehicles that could have been tagged by the city's surveillance system but they had been careless about what types of shoes they used, making it easier to distinguish the tread when he came across an impression.

The gentle patter of ice cold rain had started without warning. The chilled moisture streamed down the bare branches of the trees, collecting at the lowest point to fall in steady dribbles and rivulets. Auel's hair matted against his head, his coat several shades darker now that it was wet. He was about to take another step when he caught the unmistakable whiff of ozone and charred bark. Auel refocused, looking around until he saw a triangular metal fragment that was all too familiar.

Approaching cautiously, the hunter crouched down and picked up the small piece of metal. He studied its edges, turning it over. Of all the developments the werewolf hunters had developed over the years, the fragmenting taser grenade had been the most unique. Auel looked around to try and spot the other pieces. Even the oncoming storm hadn't diminished the moonlight enough to keep him from catching the metallic edges scattered across the uneven terrain. If anything, it had been too easy to spot them because there had been far more fragments than Auel expected. It looked as though two or three of the grenades had been tossed into the same area. Rising back to his feet, Auel pressed on. He'd made it another dozen yards before he heard something move, wet and gritty. Auel paused when he heard something click and saw movement at ground level through the brush.

"The sun will rise my brother." he called out.

"Oh thank god, thank god..." A labored, panting voice sounded. Auel had no compunctions about using hunter call signs against them if he had to. It was preferable to being shot. Auel ducked below one low branch and then stepped over gnarled roots, his boots splashing down into a muddy puddle next to the hunter. Auel's eyes widened a bit as he laid eyes on the man. He had to be in his mid thirties, his short, brown patchy beard caked and smeared with mud and rain. Auel crouched down, though as he got a more even level with the hunter it became apparent just how yellowed the man's skin was. Veins had burst in his eyes and the gashes on his neck seemed to be weeping a purple liquid rather than blood.

"What happened here?" Auel asked. The hunter tried to shake his head, though the movements were limited and stiff.

"That thing... followed us back to camp. It took out Jonas and Beagle without making a sound. Never saw anything like it..." The hunter wheezed, eyes unfocused and glazing over.

"Was it a werewolf?" Auel asked, concerned that one of the students or citizens might have caught the hunters vandalizing the building. The hunter let out a short, pained laugh.

"We came here looking for monsters... They let one loose we've never seen before... Eyes as black as night with a silver blade to stab into your soul... Looked like it crawled out of the bowels of the Earth... Even its claws were... were..." The hunter trailed off, his voice

catching, his eyes completely vacant. Auel's mind scrambled. The hunter's description didn't seem to match any kind of werewolf he'd seen.

"How long were you here? How long were you casing the town?" Auel asked, wondering if they had been the ones to attack Rodrigo.

"Two days, found us in just two days..." The hunter whispered, no longer able to move his head. His mouth opened to say something, to ask something, to confess something, but the last flicker of life faded before he could finish his sentence. There was no motion, no sound other than the pelting rain coming down and saturating everything. The water poured over the hunter's lifeless face, dribbling down into the depression his body had made in the soft ground.

Auel looked at the man for a long moment, surprised by how cold he felt about it all. He had spent almost a quarter of a century being trained to be a hunter by his family. It had been a fluke chance he'd learned about the coming of a dark spirit that threatened everyone. Working with Marco and his pack had opened his eyes to the fact that the hunters were more monstrous than the creatures they hunted. He'd tracked them down with every intention to lay out justice, to eliminate the threat, to keep the peace for Echo Creek... but someone else had beaten him there, or rather something else had.

It was clear that the hunter had been poisoned, but by what? Had the toxin been enough to make him hallucinate? There were no werewolves with black eyes and silver blades. Auel looked up and around. Other hunters had been attacked. There would be more bodies. It was likely Ren would be disappointed that he had attempted to take justice into his own hands, but whatever thing had attacked the hunters had prevented him from crossing that line. He just wasn't sure what sort of message a brutal retribution like this was going to send.

[Delicias, Chihuahua Mexico]

Night had long since fallen but there was still an energy and vitality in the air. It reminded Marco of long summer nights in Hawaii, except that it was January and far less humid in Mexico. While Colorado encouraged its residents to bundle up at the first sign of winter darkness, the escape from the heat of the day made it feel as though it was finally time to start living. Marco and Artyom sat at a table in a restaurant, the bearded men wearing t-shirts and shorts while they acclimatized. Marco's brown eyes surveyed their surroundings, taking it all in.

Webs of small bare bulbs festooned the grid of wood beams that were suspended from the ceiling, though a cross action above had been turned into skylights that no doubt shone during the day. The floor was open and spacious, finished with large tiles that seemed to evoke a feeling of marble or stone. The kitchen was half adobe brick and half stainless steel while two bars were covered with red wine stained wood polished to glossy shine. A variety of near-ceiling shelves sported a cornucopia of alcoholic drinks from around the world, and there was even a pass through window on one side looking out to a brick patio where a few more tables were situated.

The restaurant should have been the beating heart of a weekend evening, but the doors had been locked and a sign put up announcing in Spanish that the venue had been closed for a family event. Sensing the return of his parents, Artyom leaned over to steal a kiss from Marco,

their lips meeting, wreathed by their mutual beards. Marco murmured happily as Yom leaned back, timing it perfectly that their display of affection had not been witnessed.

“Of course it is serious, Anatoli, our sons have come from America to investigate because you were keeping secrets! It is the same reason that I had to come all this way...” Marya’s voice preceded her, practically buffeting Anatoli into view. Marco realized in that moment that he had been one of the ‘sons’ Marya mentioned and a smile came to his face. The harried Russian business man held up his hands, though his face curled enough that it betrayed his lycanthropic fangs briefly,

“Keeping secrets is not something that comes easily, not for this family, but you understand the importance now, do you now?” Anatoli asked, “This is not just life or death, this is the future of our species!” Anatoli replied. Before Marya could launch another salvo, there was the sound of someone clearing their throat. Marco and Yom both jumped, realizing the sound had come from a corner of the room they had been sure was empty moments before. The Yashin family Keeper, Abel, was standing there.

“It is not an exaggeration to say that we are at a crossroads, but we are at the mercy of nature, are we not?” he asked. Marya’s lips tightened but she said nothing, moving over to sit down at the table. Anatoli joined her and Abel was last to sit. Marco looked at them all in consideration. Anatoli was an immense man at six and a half feet tall. There was more silver in his hair and beard than there had been the last time Marco had seen him. Marco wondered in the back of his mind if someone who was turned into a werewolf, like Anatoli, had a different lifespan than someone born as one, like Marya.

“Is Evergreen going to be okay?” Artyom asked, breaking his more typical quiet. Anatoli took a breath, heaving out a sigh.

“Honestly, if this had happened a few years ago it would have made us more riches than we could have possibly imagined. But Abel is right, these are changing times.” Anatoli said. Marco nodded slowly.

“Before, werewolves just wanted to hide, to avoid being found out. Now that everyone knows, moonstone would have been more important as people wanted to experiment and bring out that side of themselves?” Marco asked. Anatoli nodded.

“Exactly.” he said with a weary smile.

“The hunters will come, the blood moonstone will still be valuable. Not everyone is so-” Marya hesitated, “Bold.” she elected to say finally. Artyom growled slightly.

“You were going to say foolish.” Yom said. Marya snarled back, her eyes glinting yellow.

“I said what I said.” she responded.

“Do I have to throw some water on you both?” Abel asked. Marya and Artyom both looked at the keeper and then backed down, their postures relaxing a little more.

“So what happens next?” Marco asked, concerned about setting off another explosion.

“The blood moonstone is converting the selenite it comes in contact with. Left unchecked, it will corrupt the entire cave, possibly the entire cave system. The long term goal remains the same; harvest as much as we are going to, they allow the caves to reflood so the crystals can regrow over thousands of years. The only thing left to ask is the ratio. How much of the moonstone do we pull out before it is changed? How much of the blood moonstone do we allow to expand?” Abel said.

"It may also be time to make sure our chickens are in more than one basket." Marya commented, "Evergreen became what it is by offering the werewolf community what they needed. There are species of plants that have a profound impact on our kind, and most likely on the others. Do the Tanuki not have some leaves that are important?" Marya asked. Marco was slightly taken aback; enough that he leaned back in his seat.

"I don't know. I mean, maybe? Is there a version of wolfsbane? Something like the lotus blossom?" Marco murmured.

"Exactly. We cannot keep everything in the mines. Even if this had not happened, eventually the cave would have to be allowed to flood again." she said softly. Yom shook his head.

"This isn't about us." Yom's voice was the deepest at the table, the low octave enough to vibrate through the wood. "We're figuring out our family livelihood, but that's not why we came all this way. Someone was stabbed with a blood moonstone knife. They almost died, and because of that, Marco was changed. If one knife could transfer powers, what could someone do with more of this stuff? How did the cave start changing? Was it natural, or did someone contaminate it? Did someone plant a seed down there just so they could make more of this stuff?" Yom asked. There was silence at the table for a long moment, a heavy weight that seemed to pull in the energy from the air Marco had been feeling earlier.

"It could be." Abel said finally, "Even if the guilty party didn't sneak down there themselves, all it would take was one bribe to the right person to place a small piece of blood moonstone in the right spot and start everything in motion. That same person, or even someone else, might have taken out a crystal or two. Even our advanced security isn't foolproof." Abel said.

"We came here for answers, but we can't exactly turn back time..." Marco said in thought, "It's just like what you said about the cave. We can't change what's already happened, we just have to prepare for what's coming. We're going to need a sample of the blood moonstone. Probably several samples." Marco said. Anatoli's eyes widened.

"And what, take it on an airplane back through customs?!" Anatoli asked.

"If that's what it takes." Yom replied. Anatoli shook his head.

"We have channels, we have a process... We have-" Anatoli was cut off.

"We have secrets. Too many secrets. Old secrets." Marya murmured, "Then we send them back on a private plane, one without as many prying eyes." Marya said to her husband. A slow, deliberate smile crossed her lips, "Did you not teach me that there is no problem that cannot be solved with money?" she smirked, "At least while we know we have it for sure..." she said. Anatoli acquiesced, leaning over to give her a kiss. Marco was a bit stunned by how their fire could burn so brightly one moment and then turn to honey the next. He was glad that Artyom hadn't seemed to inherit the need for such things. Under the table, he reached over and gave Yom's hand a squeeze. Yom smiled and returned the affection.

"Abel, can you show us what you've learned about the blood moonstone while we're here? Sort of catch us up?" Marco asked. Abel nodded.

"Of course." Abel said, his eyes thoughtful, "You said the weapon was used on a Tanuki, and that's what drew out the power and transferred it to you?" he asked.

"I mean, that's the only way I can imagine becoming a Tanuki." Marco said. Abel ran his finger in a circle on the table as he deliberated.

"Moonstone stores the power of the moon and gives it out to awaken the werewolf within when needed. The blood moonstone of legend was parasitic, drawing out the power from a living being... But we only know of it in its powdered form, not refined as we refine moonstone. If it is taking from one and broadcasting it, could it be possible to make a ward out of moonstone? At least for werewolves..." Abel said.

"It sounds like an experiment at the very least. Would they cancel each other out? Would the one buy time and stall the other? Would they react to one another?" Marco asked.

"Or contaminate each other from a distance..." Yom murmured.

"I know time is of the essence, but I will have my laboratories begin researching to give you answers as well." Anatoli said. Marya reached to rub his shoulder.

"One way or another, we've got to find the right path forward." Marco said.