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# Vampires, Werewolves, & Hunters

*A supernatural world where vampires are divided into classes, allowed to operate only under license...and kept in line by specially strained vampire hunters. A world where werewolves are few and far between, and some do not even understand all that they are and could be.*

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## Locke & Key

"I'm cold."

"Kill the vampire, sweetheart, then you can have a hot shower and a cup of coffee."

Locke smiled, but didn't let it slip into his voice. "Fuck you," he said. "You only call me sweetheart when you think I'm being a baby."

"Whatever you say. Sweetheart."

Rolling his eyes, Locke pulled out his guns one by one and checked them one last time. "Key, stop trying to flirt with your boss and do your damn job."

"Yes, sweetheart," Key replied, and Locke could hear him typing furiously away on his laptop.

Locke made a mental note to administer a beating when he got home. Lightly touching his clothing, his weapons, ensuring all was as it should be and could be grabbed in a moment's notice - or not grabbed, whichever applied - he climbed out of his beat up car, popped a piece of cinnamon gum, and started walking down the dark street toward the apartment building at the end of it.

Snow crunched beneath his heavy boots, clung to his dark brown hair and black corduroy jacket. He grimaced as the wind briefly picked up, making the cold that much more miserable. Ugh. He hated hunting in winter. Well, at least they weren't up New England way this time.

The apartment building looked like it had survived a small war. It was little wonder only broken vamps really lived in it.

Creaky, broken, it smelled positively rank - piss and cheap booze, sweat and sex, cigarettes and mold, and beneath all of it the unmistakable stench of old blood. Locke's nose twitched. Ugh, he hated broken vampires.

"Hey," Key said in his ear, "even the nastiest broken vamps are better than a single top vamp."

Locked glared at the dark, mildewed stairwell he had to climb, wishing Key was present to receive the glare and not a couple miles away. "Stop doing that."

Key sniggered. "Not my fault your thoughts are easy to predict."

"Shut up. Final count, how many would you say?"

"Mmm," Key murmured thoughtfully, keys clicking at a rapid fire rate. It was a familiar sound, soothing in the nasty atmosphere of the rundown building. "Reports seem to indicate three to five. Given the low population density in this area,

the lack of crime...the absence of any sort of animals in your prelims, I'm going to say five, possibly six. No one has ever reported so much as finding a body, so they're smart or at least neat."

Locke glanced at a puddle of some questionable substance. "If you say so."

"At least they're not so broken as to ignore that sort of thing," Key said. "Six at most, come on. It won't take you long at all. I'll start the coffee once you're on your way back."

"Shut the fuck up," Locke said. "You do your job, I'll do mine."

"Yeah, yeah," Key replied, then fell silent save for the rhythmic clicking of his keyboard.

Locke weighed his options, touching each of his four revolvers, and finally settled on the Blackhawks. The Smith and Wesson were more fun, but guns meant for 'big game' were hardly required for a bunch of stupid broken vamps.

Unfortunately.

"If you want to play with the Model 500," Key said in his ear, laughter plain in his voice, "we can always switch to hunting top vamps."

"Fuck you," Locke muttered, drawing his Blackhawks and finally approaching the stairs. He didn't bother to be quiet, because any second now the vamps would pick up his scent anyway.

Oh, how they would pick it up.

There were two ways to hunt vamps when it came to smell - hide your scent, or show it off.

Locke's favorite day of every month in school had been show and tell.

He'd barely cleared the landing when a door at the end of the hall flew open and something that looked vaguely human half-lunged, half-stumbled out.

Ugh. He hated broken vamps, but he always felt sorry for the bastards, too. He wondered sometimes which feeling motivated him to pull the trigger.

Raising the gun in his right hand, Locke fired. The Blackhawk was by no stretch of the imagination a quiet gun. Nor a pretty one, so far as results went. The vamp went down like a lump of raw meat, finished off neatly and handily by a .44 hollow-point silver bullet.

The only thing his mama made better than bullets was chocolate chip cookies, and the fact she was due to be sending him both shortly was immensely cheering.

Locke turned as he heard something behind him and raised his second gun, taking down two more. That was three down, about three to go.

He grimaced at the strong smell of blood, which did not go well with the rest of the nastiness filling the old building. Not much remained of the corpses. Broken vampires weren't strong enough to have the regenerative abilities of a top vampire, but even if they did the hollow point silver slugs caused too much damage for that to fix. Even a top would be pissed off for a couple of hours after taking a hit like that.

Four bullets left in the first gun, three in the second. He still had the Smith & Wesson and the semi as a final resort. Whistling cheerfully now, ignoring the pained sigh in his ear, Locke moved toward the first vamp he'd shot, stepping over the mess and into the apartment.

If he was not already long-resigned to the stench of decay and old blood, it would have made him gag. Broken vamps were the worst - converted from humans, which seldom went well. It usually broke them one way or another, creating the repulsive, pathetic creatures he most frequently killed.

Shit, someone turned him into a bloodsucker he'd fucking go psycho too. Well, he'd kill himself, but that was beside the point.

He heard shuffling from what was probably a bedroom and moved that way, carefully moving around the drained corpses and other rot spread across the floor, wanting badly to puke.

"Think happy thoughts," Key said.

"Stop reading my fucking mind," Locke muttered.

Key snickered, then once again fell silent.

Cautiously Locke pushed open the bedroom door, ready to fire - but when he entered, all he saw was a broken vampire lying prone on a bed with stains best described as interesting. A lamp cast orange-yellow light, making everything that much uglier. The vamp moved, lifting its head just enough to look at him with eyes that might have belonged to a drug addict suffering serious withdrawal.

Locke shot him in the head and turned away before the mess really did make him hurl. Didn't matter how many years he did this, he never really got used to it.

He went through the remaining rooms as quickly as he could without being too hasty, then tracked back the way he'd come to explore the apartment from which the other two vamps had come. Nothing but more nastiness.

Frowning, he returned to the hallway. Fuck, he didn't want to have to explore the entire goddamn building and every apartment in it. If there was nothing but vamps around....generally they kept to the same hovel, and the first floor of apartments made the most sense...

Standing perfectly still, he listened, waited. If a vampire was close enough to smell him, it would come for him. He worked hard to make his blood the feast of feasts for a vampire. If nothing showed, he'd go up another level.

A faint creak.

He turned - and swore. "You're not fucking broken."

The vampire before him bared his pointy teeth in something that was part smirk, part grin, part you look really damned tasty, hunter.

In his ear, Key was cussing up a storm.

Locke dropped his Blackhawks and drew the Smith & Wesson even as the average-type vampire lunged for him. The guns roared as he fired, flashing bright enough to light up the dark hallway for a heartbeat. With enough firepower to take down a bear, they were more than enough to put a hurt on an average vamp.

It jerked back, right off its feet, and Locke wasted no time in shooting it a second time.

"Get it?" Key asked.

"Yeah," Locke replied tersely. "None of the research suggested a true vamp might be skulking about."

Key was silent a moment, but Locke could hear him clicking away at a furious pace. Though he'd never fucking admit, he loved to watch and listen to Key type - it should be inelegant, or tedious, or something, but somehow he found it graceful and captivating.

"I still don't see evidence of that," Key said at last. "Maybe he was a not-so-proud papa stopping by like we did. Shitty timing."

Locke grunted an acknowledgment. "I'm going to check the rest of the building."

"Yeah," Key agreed, then went back to typing and listening.

He made quick work of it, exploring every floor - but his searching turned up no more vampires, and even forcing himself to double check resulted in nothing. Tired, cranky, thoroughly fed up, Locke called it a night. "Going to torch it, then I'm fucking done."

"Roger," Key said. "I'll go start making the coffee. Your mom's package arrived."

"If you eat all my fucking cookies," Locke replied, "I'm going to engrave your name on a silver bullet."

Key snickered. "If you kill me, darling, you'll never figure out where I hid them."

"So long as it's not in my mother fucking underwear drawer again," Locke grouched.

He pointedly ignored the loud, obnoxious, entirely too gleeful laughter roaring in his ear and trudged back to his car to get

what he needed to set the building on fire.

"You stupid son of a bitch," Locke said, just standing and gawking.

Key grinned and added fuel to the fire by pulling down the brim of the gimme cap he wore - black with a detailed bat stitched in silver thread, with brilliant red eyes. Locke loved that hat, he wore it constantly unless he was on a job.

On top of all that, the motherfucker was holding a cup of coffee and had a chocolate chip cookie in his mouth.

"You just love pissing me off, don't you, asshole?" Locke grouched, stomping loudly across the cement floor of the workshop to where he kept all his guns. Pointedly ignoring Key, he set to work checking, cleaning, and reloading his guns before locking all but one of the Blackhawks away.

That done, he stripped off his jacket, sweater, and undershirt, then moved to a backroom to finish stripping before he stepped into the shower area. Once this had been a locker room, and it still showed in the benches and lockers, the ugly tile and half dozen shower heads. Cheap rent, though, and by the month - all they really needed. Not much longer they'd probably be moving on further south. He fucking refused to hunt vamps further north this time of year unless it was strictly necessary.

Finished showering, he grabbed a towel from the row of hooks and scrubbed his hair mostly dry before toweling off. Moving to the first row of lockers, he opened the third one down and pulled out clean boxers, socks, undershirt. Opening the next one, he tugged on jeans that were neither too tight nor too loose. Tugging on a long-sleeved red t-shirt, he sat down to pull on his boots, then finally returned to the workshop.

A fresh cup of coffee, a plate of cookies, and his gimme cap waited on his makeshift desk. Grunting, he drank half the hot coffee in one long swallow, then tugged on his cap and snatched up a cookie.

Yummy.

"You're still an asshole," he said eventually.

Key laughed. He had platinum hair, blue eyes, and a pretty face - the spitting image of an angel or a mama's boy. Except for the part where he was a smartass, troublemaking computer nerd with a death wish. "Job well done, sweetheart. Sit back and relax, stop getting so uptight."

"Something about you brings out the uptight in me," Locke replied dryly.

"I can ease that uptight, you know."

Locke groaned. "Don't start with me," he said.

Key just grinned his evil grin, the one that could also be insanely hot at the worst possible moments. Namely when Locke's libido needed an ice-cold shower before he did something stupid.

He didn't know why he kept resisting, because if there was one thing Key had always made clear it was interest in Locke - but he couldn't quite give in. Something held him. A niggling sense that said it would be a bad idea, and Locke had learned the hard and painful way to trust his instincts.

Those instincts said he could trust Key with his life...but weren't fly with fucking him. Which was too bad, because he wanted to see what that pretty but dirty mouth looked like around his cock.

Shifting in his seat, Locke summoned a scowl to counter that damned grin.

"Come on," Key goaded. "We're a regular bad porn joke, obviously it's meant to be."

Locked groaned.

Key just grinned. "Key. Locke."

"Wrong," Locke replied, despite knowing it was always stupid to actually attempt these discussions. "We've got two keys and no locks. So shut up."

The evil in Key's smile cranked up about three notches. "Not if it's a key for the back d-"

"Shut up!" Locke half-shouted the words to drown Key out, mortified and maybe the slightest bit not mortified, which was more upsetting. "Don't you have work to do?" he asked desperately.

"Yeah, yeah," Key said cheerfully, though Locke didn't miss the slight disappointment in his eyes.

He couldn't help it. Something about Key, despite their being partners in hunting for the past five and a half years, nagged at him.

Maybe it was just the lingering foul taste of his last partner coloring his perception and fucking up his instinct. He'd pondered that possibility before. Steven had been perfect - partner, friend, lover. All of it. Until he'd put a knife - literally and figuratively - in Locke's back.

Key had approached him in a bar in California one night, knowing way more than Locke had thought anyone should know. Since then, he'd learned Key was good at knowing shit he shouldn't. Way too fucking good, but at least usually it worked to Locke's advantage.

He'd agreed to cooperate with Key for a job or two. When he'd finally left California, however, Key had been with him. They worked well together, despite the chronic smart ass from which Key suffered.

Despite the fact he was keeping a secret. Locke knew enough about secrets to know Key was keeping one, and that - no doubt combined with his past - kept him from making more than a few enthusiastic fantasies reality.

He ate another cookie as he wrote a report on the night's events.

Five minutes after he emailed it home, a chat window popped up on his screen.

Locke rolled his eyes, and typed to his mother that he was fine, the average hadn't even fucking touched him, the bullets were perfect and the cookies tasty.

An hour later she finally signed off to go to bed - no doubt his father had been yelling at her for the past forty five minutes - and went to get more coffee.

He smiled faintly to see Key had made him a fresh pot, and went in search of his geek.

The bottom floor of the building they were renting had been a workshop of some sort, the kind to require a locker room. Upstairs had clearly been living quarters, likely for whoever had owned the workshop.

Key was stretched out on a ratty couch in the living area, something they'd scrounged for twenty bucks from college students desperate to get rid of it. They'd cleaned and de-fouled it as best they could, but Key had still thrown a quilt over it. He lay with his head on the farthest armrest, so he faced the door, and flicked his eyes up as Locke appeared.

"Thanks for the coffee," Locke said.

"Sure," Key said quietly.

"Who are you chatting with?" Locke asked, moving to the couch and lifting Key's feet, sitting down before letting them fall across his legs.

"Old friend in Cali," Key replied. "I was asking him about our average."

Locke grunted. "I'd have asked my folks, but fuck - I'd still be talking to my mother. I'm going to fucking kill Billie for teaching her how to use a computer - and instant chat."

Key laughed and playfully dug his heel into Locke's thigh. "Your mom is cute. At least when she's bugging you and not me. She thinks I'm good for you, by the way. I didn't tell you that."

"Yeah, yeah," Locke said, and took a sip of coffee to avoid saying or doing something stupid.

Key sighed softly. "We've got only the park to investigate, but likely it'll only be one broken. By end of week we can move south. That should make you happy." He closed his laptop with a faint click and set it aside, folding his arms beneath his head. "I called ahead to price places to stay. Nice little thing by the sea. No one wants it 'cause people were murdered there."

"Right up our alley, then," Locke said, drinking more of his coffee.

"Billie recommended it," Key replied. "Your brother is like a vampire hunter slash real estate agent."

Locke sniggered at the idea of Billie as a real estate agent. "I think it's more that he's good at finding places to hide." He stifled a yawn. "I guess if we're moving soon, we should start packing and shit. What's this thing in the park?"

"Crazy homeless guy, according to the natives, except he likes to attack people - a few have reported that he tried to bite them. Cops have tried to find him, but never have any luck."

"Easy enough," Locke said, finishing his coffee and bending a bit to set the mug on the floor. He leaned back with a soft sigh, resting his head against the back of the couch, closing his eyes.

He wanted to crawl into bed and sleep for a week, but that required moving.

The feet resting on his lap vanished, and he heard Key move. Then a warm hand lay gently against his cheek, soft against the stubble.

"You're an idiot," Key said, and there was no mistaking the affection mingled with the frustration in his voice.

It hurt, and though it was probably more imagination than reality, it also made the old scar on his back hurt. He didn't want to face another betrayal someday, not matter how much he might care about his partner.

He cracked his eyes open, instantly taken by the goddamn wow of Key's eyes. So fucking blue. His own were a muddy brown color. "You have no room to talk."

"Tell me about it," Key said softly. "You'd think after over five years of 'not interested' that I'd fucking give up."

Locke frowned. "Yeah, well. You haven't quit making your idiotic jokes, either."

"Guess I'm dense or stubborn."

"Yeah, but you're pretty. It's allowed."

Key laughed briefly, then leaned in just close enough to brush a feather soft kiss across Locke's lip. In the next breath he was gone, and Locke was alone. The room was quiet, but his thoughts were plenty loud enough.

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Locke shouldered his duffle bag and slammed the trunk closed, then shoved his keys into the front left pocket of his jeans. Turning around, he started to cross the parking lot to the motel room they'd rented for the night.

One flat and a nasty mess of snow did not pleasant traveling make. Fuck it was the unanimous decision; the vampires could wait an extra day to get shot.

He'd taken three steps when he realized that the rather nice looking backside crouched in front of the bushes off to the left belonged to someone he knew. A sinking suspicion growing, he stomped through the snow and ice to where Key was all but buried in the bushes - and Locke could hear all too familiar noises coming from him.

Noises which elicited pathetic mewling sounds in response.

Stifling a groan, Locke dropped his duffle bag and crossed his arms. "No." He nudged Key's lower back with the toe of his boot. "I said no."

"Aww," Key said in protest, slowly standing up and turning around, arms curled against his chest - and a tiny kitten cradled in them. It was the color of soot, with bright green eyes way too big for its evil, manipulative little face. "It's all alone. No sign of mama."

"No," Locke said again. "We travel too much for pets, and - just no. I'm not arguing about this. You're pretty, but that doesn't mean you can act like a girl and try to adopt every cute stray that stumbles into your path. Come on, be a man and put the kitten down."

Key ignored him, stomping away from the bushes and across the parking lot, stopping only to swipe his keycard before vanishing into his room.



Locke watched him go, and could tell from the set of Key's shoulders that he was in deep shit for the acting like a girl crack.

Sighing, he picked his duffle back up and made for the room.

It was old and dingy, with the same part mold, part too much cleaner smell that all hotels seemed to have no matter how up or downscale they were.

Key sat Indian-style on the farthest bed, back to Locke.

Biting back another sigh, Locke threw his bag on the floor and knelt to dig out the few things he wanted close to hand. He was already wearing the Desert Eagle, but he'd be happier with one of the Blackhawks and he needed to ward the doors on the chance an unwanted guest tried to pay them a visit.

No one gave a fuck if a few or even several broken vamps died - vamps wouldn't kill their own, but they didn't fight too much if certain among them got personal with a silver bullet. Killing an average vamp...fifty fifty. A week and a half later, nothing fanged was bitching about it, so they were probably safe.

Never paid to be sloppy, however. His dad would kick his fucking ass. If his mom didn't do it first.

He glanced up as he finished checking and loading his gun, sliding it into the holster at his hip.

Still being ignored.

Damn it. He fucking hated when Key ignored him.

Heaving a loud sigh, he made certain he had his wallet and tromped back out to the car.

When he returned an hour later he was short a chunk of change he would have preferred to put toward a good steak dinner. Depositing all the stupid crap on Key's bed, he sat down in a nearby chair to remove his boots, then snatched up the TV remote and collapsed on his own bed.

After a moment he sat up to shuck off his jacket and guns, then lay back down in just his lightweight blue sweater. There wasn't much on, and he doubted he'd fucking notice if the Cowboys suddenly decided to start playing football in their birthday suits.

He turned the TV off again. "So what did you name it and how the hell are we going to lug the damn thing around with us? Cats don't travel well."

The silence dragged on, and Locke was about to go back out for the beer he'd almost gotten in the first place when Key finally broke it. "I'm not a fucking girl, you asshole."

"I know," Locke replied with a sigh that was part aggravation, part relief. "I'm sorry - but come on, it's just a damned kitten."

"Yeah, well, it was freezing to death," Key replied. "If I'm not going to leave someone as grouchy and foul-mouthed as you to freeze his ass off in the snow, I'm sure as fuck not going to leave a tiny kitten. I'll give it to your fucking cousin when we see her for Christmas."

Locke rolled his eyes. Key would give up the kitten the same way he'd give being grouchy and foul-mouthed. Like fucking hell he'd be giving up the damned kitten - not after Locke had sacrificed his fucking steak dinner to buy shit for the fluffy menace.

Whom Key was still petting, with his back still to Locke, and what a shitty evening this was turning out to be. If a vamp did stop by, Locke was going to offer it a snack.

He turned the TV on again and decided sullenly on watching the news. There was the temptation to order straight porn just to see Key get all twitchy over the boobs, but if he was still being partially ignored then he wouldn't get much of a reaction.

Sighing, he lay down completely on the bed and pulled his cap down over his eyes. It was entirely unfuckingfair that he had to put up with all this shit but didn't get sex.

Of course, that was also his own fucking fault, if he felt like being honest which he didn't.

"Sulking doesn't look good on you, sweetheart," Key said.

Locke didn't reply. See how Key liked being ignored.

He heard movement, then there was a dip in his bed as Key sat down on the edge.

"You suck at ignoring me, Locke," Key said.

Locke didn't say anything - but he did tense when a hand slid over his stomach, warm even through the layers of sweater and undershirt. Still he didn't look up, or otherwise move. Mostly cause if he did the hand would go away, and he didn't give a fuck if his instincts said that secrets meant no sex - that hand felt good.

His cap was pushed back, away, and he didn't need to open his eyes to know Key was way too close for comfort. He opened them anyway, immediately done in by too-blue eyes.

He liked to think Key kissed him, but looking back later he never really knew for sure. The way Key wound up straddling him he also preferred to think of as not his fault, but really he preferred not to think about it at all.

He tasted like peppermint and coffee, a pretty damned tasty combination in its own right and all the better for tasting like Key too.

As apologies for adopting stupid kittens and ignoring partners went, Locke thought it was pretty damned good - even if he suspected Key wasn't apologizing so much as mollifying.

It was the knock at the door that broke them apart. They stared at each other.

The knock came again, and torn between annoyance and relief, Locke twisted so that Key was lying prone on the bed. Untangling their limbs, he grabbed the nearest of his guns - the Desert Eagle - and strode to the door.

He knew it was a vampire before he had the chain undone. Instinct. As he opened the door, he could also smell it.

Coppery. Sharp. Vampire.

Underneath the metal tang, however, he smelled something ever so faintly sickly sweet.

Fuck.

Locke stepped back as the door was pushed open, raising the Desert Eagle as the top vamp stepped into the room. Behind him he heard Key pick up his Blackhawk. "What the fuck do you want?"

"To see your license for one, hunter," the top said calmly. He was a handsome one - for a vampire. Black hair, dark green eyes, features that were the perfect line between handsome and pretty. Perfect, at least, for some smarmy men's magazine that sold twenty dollar deodorant.

"Asshole," Locke said, just on principle, but didn't argue the demand. Still leveling his gun at the top's head, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out the leather fold that never left his person if he wasn't naked. He tossed it.

The vampire caught it easily, and flipped it open. He contemplated the license for several long moments. It wasn't really much to look at, so Locke didn't know why the bastard was staring. Him looking slightly too neat and tidy for the unsmiling picture to be a mug shot. He'd worn the blue sweater his mother had chosen 'cause she would have given him six kinds of hell if he'd worn anything else.

He tossed it back, and Locke caught it. Shoving it back in his pants, he returned his free hand to the gun.

"Now, how about your license?" The vampire asked, turning to look at Key.

Locke didn't take his eyes off the vamp, watching as he caught Key's license, frown deepening as the vamp started chuckling.

The vampire tossed the license back, laughing softly.

"Let's see your clearance, giggles," Locke snapped.

Smirking, the vampire reached into his jacket and pulled out a wallet. He tossed it over.

Catching it, Locke flipped the wallet open and held it up so he could look at it without taking his eyes completely off the vampire.

Registered level nine. Fuckity McFuck. A top amongst tops. Damn it. "What the fuck are you doing here, giggles?"



The vampire plucked his wallet from Locke's hand and tucked it away. "I have come to have a word with you."

"I don't want a word with you," Locke snapped.

"I want you to do something for me," the vampire said, speaking as though Locke had not. "Word on the street is that your family is the best in hunting, and you're one of the top on offer."

Hearing one of the old vamps say something like 'word on the street' was like hearing his grandmother say 'what up, my homeslice?' Jarring and more than a little surreal. Old school should stick to old school.

"Fuck off and die," Locke said. "The only thing I do for bloodsuckers is introduce them to Mr. Smith and Mr. Wesson."

The vampire laughed again. "You are amusing. I'm afraid you do not have a choice; you will help me."

"Oh, I have a choice," Locke replied. "I'm leaning toward pulling the trigger. It wouldn't kill an old bastard like you, but it'd piss you off and that'd make me pretty damn happy."

He almost did pull the trigger when the motherfucker laughed again. Seriously. He was getting real damned sick of that sound.

Then the bastard grinned in that way only vampires could - all fang and menace. One hundred percent pure I can and will rip out your throat and enjoy every second of it and there's nothing you can do about it.

Which was more or less true. The older the vampire, the more trouble. Generally, though, the really old vamps kept to themselves. They weren't interested in others, except as an occasional meal. Locke didn't think he'd ever heard of one just popping in to ask a vampire hunter to 'do something for him.' What the fuck?

"I want you to retrieve someone for me."

Locke put a bit of pressure on the trigger.

"A human," the vampire continued. "He belongs to me. Another top took him and I want you to get him back."

"Why us?" Key asked before Locke could repeat his desire that the vampire fuck off and die. "You could do it yourself easily, or get the hunter for your level to attend to it."

"Ah, child, if it were that easy I would not be here. I want this matter resolved more quietly than that. If I do it myself or drag in a top-level hunter, it would be supremely problematic."

The words were said matter-of-factly; like it was par for the course that one vampire would ask hunters to kill another. This was only one reason of many he hated vampires - they made no goddamn fucking sense.

"Which top?" Key asked.

Locke was going to kill him. They did not hold conversations with vampires. They killed vampires. That was it.

"Tremont," the vampire replied.

"Ah," Locke said. "Now this makes more sense. You're Alessandro."

"Yes," Alessandro replied, smirking. "My permit said as much."

"Shut up," Locke snapped.

He heard something that sound suspiciously like a snicker coming from Key's vicinity. Ignoring that, but making a note to come back to it later, he focused on Alessandro. "Answer is still no, and if you don't fuck off then after I'm done killing you I'm going to call Preston and then he'll kill you."

"Get my human back," Alessandro said slowly, "or I will see to it that everyone in your vampire hating world knows your little partner there is a half-breed."

Locke froze. What? He unthinkingly turned to look at Key, who had gone white - not pale or sickly, but stark fucking white.

A half-breed? Key? He so was fucking not a...

"Oh, my," Alessandro said with a chuckle. "I see you didn't know. I smelled him a mile away and realized it was probably a

secret between the two of you. I see it was a secret of one. Hmm. Tremont has a young man by the name of Heath. Bring him to me, and if you kill Tremont in the process - all the better. Succeed and I will see to it your secret is kept, child." He tossed a large brown envelope on the bed. "There is all the information you should need."

He turned and left as suddenly as he'd come.

Locke dropped his gun on the bed as he spun to face Key. "You're a motherfucking dhampir?"

Key nodded, still white-faced.

"A goddamn half-breed," Locke said in disgust. "You may as well be a fucking vampire and you never goddamn told me and you were kissing me and I knew you were keeping secrets but I never would have guessed you were a fucking dhampir."

He couldn't think straight. He couldn't think at all.

Key moved around the bed and toward him in what seemed like slow motion. Unreal. Yet now that he knew it seemed so fucking obvious - Key hated his guns, Key loved bad weather, hated summer...so many little fucking things that he should have noticed, except he'd been too busy trying not to notice Key.

He acted without thinking as Key reached him, swinging hard, bitterly satisfied to feel Key's jaw beneath his fist, the grunt of pain as Key stumbled back and crashed into the TV.

"Get the fuck away from me." A dhampir. A fucking half-breed. Maybe he'd been planning to make the kitten a snack.

"Locke, you don't-"

"I don't want to hear it," Locke snarled. Half-breed. They weren't allowed to have hunting licenses. More often than not dhampir turned into broken vamps. He'd killed more than a few of the fuckers. This whole time....he'd just been making out with a more or less vampire. "You're a fucking liar and a fucking vampire."

He turned around and started throwing his shit back in his bag. At one point he felt a touch to his shoulder, but only turned around to punch Key a second time. After that, Key stayed on the far side of the room.

Slinging his bag over one shoulder, he strode to the door.

"What about the job the vampire wants us to do?" Key asked faintly.

Locke didn't turn around, knuckles white where he gripped the doorknob. "You're the half-bloodsucker who didn't want to share his secret. You retrieve him. It's got nothing the fuck to do with me."

Yanking the door open, he slammed it shut behind him and then stomped across the snow-covered parking lot to his car. Throwing his bag in the back seat, he cleared away all the snow and ice he could, then threw himself into the driver's seat and started the car.

He made his way slowly through the miserable weather, hands unsteady due to the crappy heating in his old car and the rage still coursing through him.

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Locke counted corpses as he reloaded his revolvers.

Seven. There should be nine. Looks like two had gotten away. But where? "Ke-" He stopped himself with a curse, an all too familiar ache flaring to life in his chest. Stupid, lying fuck. Three weeks and Key still had him feeling pissed off.

Or something.

Locking the cylinder of his second Blackhawk back in place, he moved quickly past the corpses spread out in front of him toward the back half of the house.

Somehow he wasn't having as much fun as he usually did. As difficult and unpleasant and smelly and dangerous as the job was - he'd always enjoyed it. No one could hate being a vampire hunter and do it anyway. It just wasn't possible.

He'd always flown predominantly solo. Every now and then his brothers or sister needed assistance and they teamed up then. He'd hired on local help in larger cities...it wasn't until stupid fucking Key that he'd gotten himself a full time partner. Even Steven hadn't really helped him all that much; he'd done his own thing most of the time.

A partner who made bad jokes and never knew when to stop being a smartass. A partner who didn't blink at the idea of killing and burning bodies but couldn't bear to leave a little kitten in the cold...an obnoxious asshole but one who could make a wicked pot of coffee.

Who was also a fucking dhampir and right now was probably laughing at how gullible Locke had been.

That knot in his chest twisted again. Locke banished his thoughts with a curse and kicked open the door to the kitchen.

Something came at him and he dropped it, the sound of his revolver in the enclosed space deafening.

Eight.

He eyed his options - the back door was wide open...and the pantry door firmly shut. Checking the vamp he'd just killed, satisfied it was well and truly dead, he stepped toward the pantry. Kicking it open, he lifted his gun and fired.

Nine.

Easy peasy. Double checking the final corpse, he turned and made his way through the house to give it a last once over.

He was nearly done with the second floor when he heard a car coming up the long gravel drive. Who the fuck...? Quickly clearing the remaining rooms, he strode downstairs and out onto the ramshackle porch of the old cabin he'd just cleared of a vampire infestation.

The cherry-red camaro parked right alongside his own green mustang had him swearing a blue streak. "What in the blazing fuck are you doing here, Pretty Boy?"

"Fuck you. Mama told me to track your ass down and beat it."

"Go to hell, Preston, and take mom with you."

Preston rolled his eyes. "You refuse to answer your phone, you won't sign on to chat - not even a fucking email. Of course mama is worried about her baby boy. Why the fuck are you being an ass? Where's Key and why isn't he beating the shit out of you already?"

"Shut up and go away," Locke snarled, stomping down the stairs and to his car.

"Ah," Preston said. "I see. You broke up with Key. Why'd you go and do a stupid thing like that?"

Locke slammed the car door shut and turned back around. "Fuck you. I didn't break up with him because we were never fucking dating because I don't date motherfucking dhampirs. Now go the hell away." He opened the car door again and threw himself inside. Fuck. He still had to burn the house.

Swearing, he climbed back out, slammed the door shut, and went to fetch supplies from the trunk.

"Dhampir?" Preston asked. "You're fucking kidding me. Key? No way."

"Yeah," Locke said sourly.

Preston whistled. "Clever little bastard to keep that a secret for so long. How'd you finally figure it out?"

"Would you go the fuck away?"

"Not now that you've told me your ex-boyfriend is a dhampir. You sure have shitty ass luck, Locke."

"Fuck off and die," Locke snapped, all but shouting the words. "He wasn't my goddamn boyfriend." He slammed the trunk closed and then stooped to retrieve the cans of gasoline he'd taken from the trunk.

Preston rolled his eyes. "Twenty eight and you still act like you're fifteen."

"Oh, yeah, like you're one to talk."

"I will kick your ass, and we both know I can do it," Preston said, grabbing him by his jacket as he walked by and throwing him against the car.

Locke snapped and threw a punch. "Go the fuck away!"

Half an hour later he had nothing to show for his efforts but a bloody lip and sore body. But Preston had a black eye. That made him feel a little better.

"Mama never spanked you enough growing up," Preston said with a grunt. "Can I let you go or you going to keep being a pain in the ass?"

"Get the fuck off me," Locke said sullenly.

Preston grunted and let him go, standing up and hauling Locke to his feet. "Now, asshole, what the fuck is your problem? If you miss Key that goddamn much, go fucking find him."

Locke turned away to retrieve the things he'd dropped before they started fighting. "I don't want to talk about it. Go away."

"Why don't you tell me the whole story," Preston said with a sigh. "Cause if you don't, I really will kick your ass and then we'll have to deal with mama."

Rolling his eyes in defeat, Locke finally told him all that had passed.

"Shit, is Key the one I've been hearing about? I was on my way to figure out what the fuck happened with Tremont when mama told me to find you and skin you alive."

Locke went cold. "What the fuck happened with Tremont? Can't you keep your fucking tops under control?"

Unlike him and Billie, Preston kept an eye on all registered top vampires. Less fighting, but a hell of a lot uglier when they did decide to fight.

"Fuck you," Preston retorted. "I was across the damned country doing precisely that when I got the call, and thanks to you I still don't know what's going on. All I know is Tremont was attacked and about twenty broken and six average are all dead, and Tremont was badly injured. Do you know how much fast talking I'm going to have to do if your boyfriend is behind this?"

"He's not my-"

"Yeah, he was, except in your fool head. Shut the fuck up. A hunter could kill that many vamps if he was trying, especially if he was the kind who hung around you."

"Why the fuck didn't Alessandro pester you?" Locke asked sourly. He knew the answer, but it annoyed him anyway. Tops weren't supposed to be fucking shit up like this, and he didn't even want to know why the fuck Alessandro cared about some random ass human. "Key and I had nothing the fuck to do with it."

"Apparently Key does, the poor bastard. Come on, let's burn this joint down and then you can go kiss and make up."

Locke frowned but didn't rise to the bait as Preston was obviously expecting. It wasn't that goddamned fucking simple. Key had lied to him. For almost six years. About being a vampire. Or close enough to one.

Fuck, he'd seen dhampir before. They were nothing like Key. It didn't make any fucking sense and that was no small part of what was pissing him off. He knew how vampires smelled; Key smelled nothing like that. He ate and drank all the right things to make his blood the tastiest thing ever so that broken vamps had a hard time really running from him on a hunt.

Key fucking helped him kill vamps - why would a fucking dhampir do that? How the fuck had he gotten a license to hunt vamps? Then again, it was Key. He could do tons of shit no one should be able to.

Like deceive his fucking partner for going on six years.

He clenched and unclenched his fist as he thought about the last time he'd seen Key. That fucking hotel room. At the time, punching the bastard had felt pretty damn good. It still might feel good.

Fuck, Key had asked him about Tremont. Had the dumbass actually tried to do it? Key was a geek, not a fighter. Why would he be that fucking stupid? Every vamp there would have known he was a dhampir, and vamps liked half-breeds about as much as humans.

"Ah, so you've started thinking again," Preston said, breaking into his thoughts.

"Shut up," Locke said. "He's a fucking dhampir."

Preston tapped the side of his nose. "People still like to say we've got werewolf in the blood because we're got such a sharp

sense of smell. It's not true, but even if it was - who gives a fuck? We're not werewolves, and we have no fucking control over our ancestors. Shit, it's not our fault our parents gave birth to us. It's their fucking fault, not ours. Key is a good guy, or so he always seemed to me. Not least of all because it was fucking obvious - even to dad and we all know how he and mom got together, Christ - that he was in love with you. I can understand you punching him...but you should have stuck around to say you were sorry."

"Oh, yes, and let's hear how many times you've said you're sorry for being an asshole, Pretty Boy."

"We're not talking about me," Preston said. "So shut up and let's burn this house down so we can go find your boyfriend."

Locke rolled his eyes, but obeyed. It wouldn't be that easy, but suddenly he felt less like shooting everything he came across.

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"You sons of bitches have about ten seconds to tell me where he is, or I'm going to bust caps all over the goddamn place," Locke said, brandishing his Model 500's with relish.

Preston rolled his eyes. "Tremont. If you please."

"Your brother could use some manners," Tremont said. "I have no idea where that nasty little dhampir got to. He took Alessandro's human and left. I've not seen him since and if I ever do I fully intend to take out his throat."

Only the thought of what Preston and their father would do to him if he killed Tremont kept Locke from pulling the trigger.

"Though I concede he was quite the little dhampir. His like I have never seen," Tremont continued.

Preston nodded. "Stop fucking with Alessandro, Tremont. I should be reporting violations left and right. You two are my biggest goddamn headache this side of the country. I wish just once I could go to California without getting yanked back here to sort the two of you out."

"We tried to leave you out of it, this time."

"Then you shouldn't have involved my fucking brother."

"That was entirely Alessandro's doing," Tremont replied. "Do not get upset with me over it. I didn't kill the stupid vampire, did I?"

Preston sighed. "Would you simmer down for a few months? Or learn to share or something? Honestly, the two of you drive me crazy."

Tremont bared his teeth in a nasty smile. "I would sooner kill myself than share anything with that bastard. I'll lay low, however. There's no choice until this wound heals. You wouldn't report it anyway, because otherwise you'd have to report the dhampir and I can see you don't want to do that."

"Yeah, yeah. Let's not start listing all the reasons we can blackmail each other, Tremont. We'd be here all fucking day. Just lay off Alessandro, I'm tired of hearing about your bitch fits."

"Get out," Tremont said. "I've had more than my fill of hunters this century."

Preston smirked briefly. "Too bad. I'll be back next week according to our regular schedule."

"Wonderful," Tremont muttered. "Go away until then."

Locke swore colorfully as he stomped from the room, badly wishing he could shoot something. He was fucking sick and tired of asking questions and getting shitty answers. It had taken them for fucking ever just to get to Tremont, and now they were still stuck in square one.

Was Key even still alive?

"I guess we should have started with Alessandro," Preston said as they stepped into the elevator. Tremont's penthouse was at the top of the highest building in the city. Alessandro, several hours away, lived in much the same manner.

Key had often made cracks about bats in belfries.

Locke frowned and holstered his guns.

The elevator chimed as they reached the bottom, doors sliding open, and Locke walked as quickly as he could from the building and down into the parking garage.

He ignored Preston, who tried a few times to call out to him, and threw himself into his car, peeling out of the parking garage as quickly as he could without killing anyone.

The drive to Alessandro's city was interminable. He wanted to scream. Or punch someone. When they finally reached the city, and Alessandro's skyscraper, he was ready to commit mass murder.

A warning look from Preston was all that kept him behaving as they rode an elevator to the top. A flash of their licenses and the security guard at the desk had only nodded mutely - an adjusted vamp, one who'd been turned and managed not to break. A pity, cause Locke really wanted to shoot someone.

Locke didn't know how Preston did it. He much preferred the shoot'em up side of the vampire business. See problem. See problem with giant hole in its chest. See problem go away.

When the elevator doors slid open, Alessandro was in the lobby - obviously waiting for them.

"Sandro," Preston greeted.

"Preston," Alessandro replied, and Locke rolled his eyes as the vampire kissed each of Preston's cheeks. Tops. He wished the fuckers had stayed in the dark ages. The older the vamp, the more annoying. He really didn't know how Preston put up with all their shit.

"You're causing trouble again, Sandro," Preston said. "One of these days I won't be able to keep the two of you from facing the music."

Alessandro chuckled. "I was trying to do you a favor, Preston, by keeping you out of this."

"By involving my brother?" Preston snorted. "Not buying it."

Alessandro merely laughed again. "I admit that was not the wisest decision, but I was not willing to trust the matter to another hunter. I had hoped by the time you heard of it, the matter would have been resolved."

"How is Heath?" Preston asked, shaking his head.

"Fuck that," Locke cut in. "Where in the goddamn hell is Key?"

Alessandro laughed again. "What makes you think I have him?"

Locke raised his Smith & Wesson, ignoring the warning look from Preston. "Tell me where he is or I'll do to you what I should have done in the first place, bitch."

"I can see the family resemblance," Alessandro said with a laugh, sliding Preston an amused look. "However, he lacks your...polish."

"Mama tried to polish him, and pop tried to beat manners into him, but I'm afraid Locke was always a lost cause," Preston said with a smile. "However, I will take his side in this. Where's Key?"

"In one of my guest rooms," Alessandro said. "Down the hallway, third door on the right."

Locke holstered his weapons and stormed past him, throwing open the doors to the penthouse proper. He ignored the handful of vampires he saw sitting around and barreled down the hallway.

He hesitated briefly as he reached the right door, hand resting lightly on the knob.

Then he scowled and pushed the door open, almost slamming it shut behind him.

Key was out cold on the bed, blankets shoved back to reveal him dressed in nothing more than a wife beater and the stupid Halloween boxers he'd bought one year with little cartoon vampire bats all over them.

He looked like shit, bandages and bruises all over the place. Despite that, he still was the finest thing Locke had ever laid eyes on. Striding to the bed, Locke sat carefully down on the edge of it. Hesitantly he reached out to touch Key's cheek,



tracing the curve of it lightly, up and then down to his jaw.

The bruises from his punches had faded, but there were far too many to replace them.

Key's eyes fluttered, and Locke hastily withdrew his hand

Too blue eyes opened and immediately found him - and the sleepiness abruptly vanished, and the coolness that replaced it made Locke sick to his stomach.

Wincing in pain, Key sat up and scooted as far away as the bed would allow. "What the fuck do you want?"

Locke balled his hands into fists, staring at them a moment before looking at Key again. "I'm an asshole."

"Yeah," Key said, laughing bitterly. "You are. That still doesn't explain why you're here. In fact it would better explain why you wouldn't be here."

"I'm here because I'm an asshole who wants to say he's sorry," Locke snapped.

Key said nothing.

Locke stifled a sigh. He'd known this wasn't going to be easy. "I fucked up, all right? I shouldn't have acted as I did."

"You didn't even give me a fucking chance to explain," Key said. He raked a hand through his hair, looking angry and miserable and defeated. Locke hated it. "I can't fucking help what I am, and I never told you because I knew you'd hate me for it, but goddamn it - I was there for you for how fucking long? You could have let me explain."

"I know," Locke said. He did. "You shouldn't have fucking kept it secret. There were better ways to let me know than to hear it from a motherfucking top. You're an asshole too."

"How was I supposed to?" Key asked angrily. "Everyone fucking hates me. Alessandro is the first vamp I've ever met who didn't want to kill me straight off. Humans want nothing to do with me when they figure out I'm half vamp. It's not my goddamn fault I was born like this, and being a half breed doesn't mean I suck blood. I never have. I can't heal, I'm not long-lived, and being out in direct sunlight for too long makes me sick. I have sharp teeth and some resistance to sunlight, and I like my steaks rare. That's fucking it. But everyone hates me for it. If keeping my being a dhampir a secret is the only way I can get anyone to care about me, fine. You try being hated your whole life, Locke. Fuck you."

Locke glared at him. "I would have fucking dealt, asshole. Over five years, and how did you expect me to fucking react? Shit, you know me and secrets. Fuck you."

"I'm not Steven!" Key snarled.

"I know!" Locke replied, shouting the words. "Christ all fucking mighty, I know. I get it. I already said I fucked up. It was a nasty surprise, but I'm here aren't I? Shit, you know me." He scrubbed tiredly at his face. "You know me better than anyone, Key. Why did you do this by yourself?"

"You didn't even give me a chance to explain," Key said quietly, speaking more to the mattress than to Locke. "You hit me twice and essentially told me to fuck off. You're hardly the first. It hurt. You told me to do it myself, even though you knew it would be stupid to try. Go to hell."

Locke sighed. "It never occurred to me you would try. You're supposed to be the smart half, remember?"

"Yeah, but I didn't need the whole fucking world knowing I was a dhampir," Key said bitterly. "You walked out on me. I had no fucking choice."

Closing his eyes, Locke called himself every nasty name he could think of. "I guess that's that, then." Shit, right now he kind of wished Steven hadn't missed when stabbing him. It would have sucked a lot fucking less than this.

He'd expected to be paying for his fuck up for a long ass time...but it hadn't really occurred to him that things would end end. Somehow he'd just assumed they'd be partners again. Key had never looked that cold, though. It seemed pretty clear the conversation was over...that everything was over.

"So what are you going to do once you're all healed up?" he asked.

"What the fuck do you care?" Key asked.

Locke sighed. "Right. None of my business anymore. I just-oh fuck it. Just find yourself a partner less stupid, all right?" He stood up and strode to the door.

"So you're leaving again?" Key asked.

"What the fuck do you want me to do?" Locke snapped, back to shouting. "You obviously don't want me to stay."

Key glared at him. "I want to know why you're here."

"I already fucking told you - I'm sorry I was an asshole. How many fucking times do I need to say it?"

"So you're sorry? That's it?"

"What do you mean that's it?" Locke demanded, exploding. "I'm here, how much more fucking obvious can I be? Do I need to spell it out that I want you back?"

"Yes," Key snapped, shouting now too. "Yes, you need to spell it out you motherfucking asshole. You punched me. Twice. You left me to deal with the vampires alone. You completely fucking bailed on me, asshole. So motherfucking spell it out, cause you sure as fuck made it clear before that you hated me."

Muttering several colorful oaths, Locke stalked back to the bed and knelt on it, looming over Key - then kissed him, and oh fucking hell he'd needed that. Groaning, he sank a hand into Key's hair and kissed exactly as he'd wanted ever since they'd first met. Key tasted a little bit like medicine, but otherwise he was pure Key, hot and male and it fixed every little thing that had been wrong since he'd stormed out.

"Is that spelling it out enough for you?" he asked when they finally broke apart.

Key blinked, looking more than a little dazed, and Locke allowed himself to feel more than a little smug. Then his expression cleared, and Key shook him hard. "You're still in deep shit, asshole. For like, a very long time."

"Yeah, I already knew that. Trust me." Locke would have laid down from sheer relief except he liked the position he was in just fine. "So does this mean we're back together?"

"More like finally together, but yeah," Key said warily. "I'm a dhampir and suddenly you're okay with that?"

"Suddenly my ass," Locke replied. "It took several days, my brother kicking my ass, and seeing you again. I really don't give a fuck what you are, so long as you're mine. Now stop forcing me to sound like a girl, asshole."

Key smiled, like really smiled, his blue eyes blazing with it. "I'm pretty sure a girl would have apologized better than you."

"Shut up," Locke said, and kissed him again so Key would shut up and because now that everything was perfect he had almost six years worth of frustration to finally work out.

## Sharing

Preston stifled a yawn as he leaned against the back of the elevator, staring blearily at the numbers across the top. When 32 lit up, he forced himself to stand and move, half walking, half stumbling out of the elevator and into the hallway outside the penthouse suite of Alessandro Gentile.

He rang the buzzer and gave in to the next yawn as the door opened. Nodding absently to the vamp who opened the door, he strode through a living room that cost more than his entire house, down the hallway to the master bedroom all the way at the end.

Given the hour, he didn't think he was obligated to knock. Pushing the bedroom door open, he padded inside, brown eyes immediately going to the plush sitting chair by the floor to ceiling windows on the north side of the room.

The man who occupied it was tall and slender, black hair and beautiful green eyes. He was handsome, and perhaps only the shadows in his eyes gave away that he was far more than the forty he appeared. "It's three in the morning, 'Sandro."

"Yes, I can see it is," Alessandro said with a smirk, eyes dragging slowly down and even more slowly back up Preston's body. "Did you walk through the city dressed like that? I'm amazed you weren't...delayed."

Preston glared, pointedly ignoring his unsubtle looks. He was not in the mood to put up with this. He wanted to go back to

bed, not sort out yet another damned hissy fit between Alessandro and Tremont.

Honestly. It was his personal opinion that they should either kill or fuck each other. Sadly, they tended to vehemently ignore this advice. The latter suggestion tended also to get him in deep shit. He still thought it valid.

"I'm supposed to make certain you're not breaking laws," he said irritably. "I'm not your babysitter."

"A pity," Alessandro said with a smirk and another unsubtle look.

"Knock it off," Preston replied. "I'm really not in the mood for your games. It's three in the fucking morning, in case I didn't already make that clear. What the fuck couldn't wait until a decent hour?"

Alessandro smirked. "Oh, he stole another human. I thought you'd prefer I call you this time rather than your brother, though he's awfully cute when he's all pissy. How are he and his little dhampir?"

Preston groaned and moved to the bed, sitting down on the edge of it and burying his face in his hands. "This is why you woke me up? I was warm and comfortable and asleep, Sandro."

"Poor hunter," Alessandro said, standing up and crossing the room and Preston suddenly realized sitting down on his bed had not been the brightest idea ever. He stood hastily up, moving away and giving Alessandro a warning glare. "I told you I wasn't in the mood for your games."

Alessandro stroked his cheek. "Whoever said it was a game?"

"Oh, please," Preston said jerking away. "I'm really not in the mood for vampire shenanigans." He pushed Alessandro away and stole the vacated chair. "If you would stop flaunting your little snacks in his face just to piss him off, he wouldn't feel obliged to steal them to piss you off. Seriously, what the fuck is wrong with the two of you?"

He closed his eyes and rest his head against the back of the chair, wishing he was still dead asleep in bed.

Instead, he was sitting in the bedroom of a top vampire. In his pajamas. Listening to a vampire roughly four hundred years old whine like a fifteen year old.

The soft brush of feet on carpet alerted him, then he suddenly felt warm fingers on his face, stroking slowly down to his neck.

Sometimes he envied his brothers. Billie and Locke spent their days killing vamps that were better off dead - or averages that broke too many laws. Preston had chosen to go the way of his uncle, dealing with the tricky tops. Life wasn't so black and white here. Laws were broken constantly, lines crossed with impunity.

His chin was lightly grasped, face tilted up, and he slowly opened his eyes as Alessandro kissed his cheeks softly. "Sandro," he said in warning.

A warning blithely ignored as Alessandro kissed him softly, slowly.

It was times like this he really envied his brothers. Vampires were monsters to them.

Preston only ever saw about a million different headaches. Tops were nothing like the broken and average vamps his brothers killed. Tops were something else altogether.

He turned his head away, breaking the lingering kiss. "If you want a human, vampire, go rescue your damned toy from Tremont. I won't say it again - I'm not in the mood for your games."

That's all they were, no matter what the vamps said. Games. Predators only played with their food when they had every intention of killing it. It drove him crazy, constantly being a source of amusement for the vamps he kept an eye on.

He stood up again, fighting another yawn. "I'll go get your damned toy back, Sandro. Stay here and out of trouble." Not giving Alessandro a chance to reply, he strode from the room, back the way he'd come, rubbing his eyes as he pondered whether or not it was worth it to go back to his apartment to get dressed.

His lips tingled; they always did when Alessandro stole a kiss. Damn it.

Veering left outside, he strode back to his apartment to fetch proper clothes.

Several hours later, in jeans and t-shirt, he let himself into Tremont's apartment.

He rolled his eyes as the first thing he saw was Tremont snacking on a pretty little redhead. Tremont didn't like redheads, except when he stole them from Alessandro. "Tremont, grow up."

"No," Tremont said, licking a bit of blood from his lips as he pushed the redhead away. "I'll stop being difficult when he stops being a prick."

Preston rolled his eyes. "I so cannot wait for the day the two of you finally kill each other."

"I do not see that happening," Tremont said idly, lying back on the long, wrap around leather couch that took up most of his living room. "Did he wake you up in the middle of the night, hunter? I would apologize, but you look even prettier rumped than you do nice and tidy."

"I will hurt you," Preston said. "He woke me up at three in the morning because you decided to be an asshole. You're both assholes. No, you're both children. What is the fucking point of all this and why must you constantly drag me into it?" He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Honestly, it's no wonder Uncle Vincent turned into a bloody alcoholic."

"Alcohol," Tremont said with a grimace. "Disgusting." He smirked, and gave Preston the same slow perusal that Alessandro had several hours earlier. "Except, of course, for a good red wine."

Preston did not bother to respond to that. Like any good hunter, he made certain he smelled good to a vampire. No vampire, broken, top, or whatever, liked to waste a good meal - even if said meal was a hunter. It made them think twice, if only on a subconscious level, and that moment of hesitation could make all the difference in the world.

Even if, in Preston's case, all it really got him most of the time was sexual harassment.

He moved to the couch, standing over Tremont, glaring at him. "Are you done for now?" he asked. "Can I take the toy back to Alessandro?"

"Maybe," Tremont said lazily, slowly opening his eyes, pushing loose strands of red-brown hair from his face. Behind the messy hair, his eyes were the color of brown sugar, warm and soft while Tremont was fed and sated. Nothing like the plain brown of Preston's eyes, or as brilliant as Alessandro's green eyes - but both vamps had a tendency to make it hard to break eye contact.

Preston had seen those soft brown eyes hard and cold, and likely would again. For now, though, Tremont might be pliable. He was dressed casually in jeans and a white oxford, the top three buttons undone. Unlike Alessandro's sparse build, Tremont had a bit of meat to him, just enough to escape being described as skinny.

Quick as lightning, and Preston chalked it up to sleep deprivation that he hadn't anticipated it, Tremont yanked him down. Preston landed with a grunt on top of Tremont, glaring angrily. "Let me up, bloodsucker. Now."

"Oh, now, calling me names won't get you anywhere." Tremont lapped lazily at his lips, and Preston struggled to remain unaffected. He had to remain unaffected. But where Alessandro's stolen kisses always tingled, Tremont's burned. "You should take a nap, hunter. Driving as tired as you are...we wouldn't want an accident to ruin your pretty face."

Preston got his hands free and managed to pinch Tremont hard - just enough to annoy him a bit. "I liked you better when you were injured," he said. "Maybe I should get Key to shoot you again."

"Oh, shut up," Tremont said, and pushed him off so that Preston landed in an awkward heap on the floor. "Take the damned toy, then. Alessandro has terrible taste in snacks. Too much junk food, that one. His blood tastes too fatty and sweet." He propped himself on his elbow, staring down at Preston with a smirk. "Unlike you. What I wouldn't give for a taste of you, hunter."

"Yeah, yeah," Preston muttered, picking himself up slowly. "I'd take it as a compliment, except not." He strode to the armchair where the redhead was sitting, still and almost asleep. Thoroughly doped by the vamps, then. Preston was glad he was immune to that - one of the traits of a hunter. If you couldn't look a top vamp in the eyes, there was no sense in being a hunter. He gently tugged the young man to his feet.

Most hunters, having to deal with this sort of thing, would shoot and never bother to ask questions. Preston had gotten used to it. Vamps needed to eat, and he could hardly bitch when in the end no real harm was done. Not like the vamps Locke regularly gunned down.

It would be a day or two until the redhead came out of his doze, and whenever Alessandro finally tired of him, he would not remember anything of his time as a vampire snack.

"I swear to god if the two of you do anything for the next seventy two hours, I will string you up by your balls and report your asses. Understood?"

Tremont motioned lazily from where he was clearly settling down into a daze. "Yes, hunter. Tell that prick to stop annoying me, and I will stop taking his treats."

"It seems me the two of you could bother to sit down and discuss things," Preston said sourly. "Do you even know why you hate each other?"

"Oh, I hardly remember the original reason," Tremont said with laugh. "These days, it's entirely on principle. He's easy to hate, I assure you. Run along, hunter, before Alessandro gets too impatient and deprives you of more sleep."

Muttering sourly about his thoughts on top vamps, Preston half led, half dragged the doped redhead to the elevator.

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He stared into his drink with disinterest. It was the best of red wines, the kind he hated drinking because he knew he wasn't appreciating it properly. Fighting an urge to tug at the collar of his tux, he pushed through the last bit of the crowd onto the balcony.

The night air was cold this high up, a nice break from the stifling heat inside.

What he wanted was a nice beer and something identifiable to eat. He hated coming to California. Every single time he came, there was a party he had to attend to make certain the tops under his charge weren't doing anything they shouldn't.

Or rather, that they weren't doing too much that they shouldn't.

He sighed and took another sip of wine. It would do wonders for his blood, but that was poor consolation at the moment - even in a room full of vampires.

"You are not enjoying yourself?"

The voice was a dark purr, and Preston had seen its owner seduce everything under the sun and moon, from human right up to fellow vampires. He had heard more than a few stories about Richard Freeman's conquests.

To him, the voice was nails on a chalkboard. He was taunting, mocking, condescending and occasionally cruel.

He was in charge of a baker's dozen of top vamps, scattered throughout the country. Of those, he hated two, was fine with nine...and didn't know what to do with the remaining two.

Richard was one of the hated.

Preston stepped away from the hand that settled at the small of his back. "You know I hate your parties, Richard. If I thought you actually cared enough to bother, I'd swear you always have them during my visits just to piss me off."

"Mmm," Richard said, dark brown eyes nearly black. "Maybe I do it because I like seeing you all dressed up...though I confess your rougher garb holds some strange appeal of its own." He reached up touch Preston's cheek, digging his nails in lightly. There was a hint of teeth in his smile, and Preston repressed a sigh. "You do seem moody tonight, hunter."

"I'm tired of parties," Preston replied. "I came to check up on you, not baby-sit you all night. Tops are all children."

Richard laughed. "Now, now. Do not group all of us with those bickering nitwits on the east coast, hunter. That's not very fair of you."

"What do you call your behavior then?" Preston snapped. Honestly.

"An attempt to overcome a challenge," Richard said, and Preston grunted as he suddenly found himself pressed up against the balcony. Warm lips brushed across his cheek, along his jaw, and down his throat.

Preston put up with it; vampires and their stupid games.

Then he felt teeth. No.

Nothing seemed noticeably to change, but Richard abruptly went still.

"You're going too far," Preston said coldly, digging his knife in just enough to break skin. "Take a bite, and it's the last bite

you'll get, blood sucker."

Richard laughed, but eased back. "It would be a fine way to go, hunter."

"Shut up," Preston said, and sheathed the long, silver knife he'd pulled from within his jacket. There were times he missed the days when his family had carried swords. Most of the family used guns, but those were too flashy for his work. Silver blades were his specialty, even if he couldn't actually carry any of the swords he'd learned so assiduously growing up. "You would think that after five hundred years, you might have acquired more manners."

He touched his throat lightly, frowning as his fingers came away bloody. "You are crossing lines you should not be crossing, blood sucker."

"Perhaps you should not come in here smelling like an invitation," Richard snapped. "You are lucky every vampire in here fears me more than they lust after you."

"Lust, no. Hunger, yes," Preston snapped. "Stop throwing a damned party every time-" He was cut off as his phone started ringing.

The ring was all too familiar, and brought with it the usual mix of annoyance, exasperation...and things upon which he preferred not to dwell. He yanked the phone from his pocket and flipped it open. "What?" Snapping it shut a second later, he pushed past Richard and back into the room proper, heading straight for the front room and his coat.

"You indulge those two far too much," Richard said from behind him.

Preston rolled his eyes. "I put up with you just as much," he snapped, fingers going to the light wound at his neck. "Even I, however, have my limits. Do not attempt to bite me again, Richard." Turning sharply on his heel, he stalked from the room.

He just barely caught Richard's parting words as the elevator doors slid shut.

"Next time, I won't attempt."

Rolling his eyes, Preston hailed a taxi on the street and asked the driver to take him to the airport.

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"I swear to god, your only goal in this century is to deprive me of as much sleep as possible," Preston grouched.

Whatever he'd been expecting, it wasn't for Tremont to slam his glass down and stalk across the room looking as though he'd like to hit someone.

"Richard bit you," he snarled.

Preston blinked, and held up his hands in a sleepy effort to ward Tremont off. "I took care of-"

Honestly. He really was tired of being sleep deprived. It made him do stupid things. Like let Richard almost bite him. And Tremont kiss him.

Tremont tasted like blood, but only faintly. It was, if Preston had not lost track of his days, about a week still before Tremont would feel like feeding again. Clashing with the copper tang was something faintly sweet. The flavor, Preston often thought, of spoiled brat.

He pushed Tremont away after a moment, summoning a glare. "As I was trying to say, I took care of it. What is it with you bloodsuckers tonight?" He sighed and strode to the couch, dropping down without ceremony to stretch out, burying his face in one folded arm, the other draping over the side of the couch.

A hand settled on his head, and he felt Tremont settle beside him on the floor.

Sighing, Preston forced his eyes open, turning his head to look. "What?"

"You look awful, hunter."

"No shit," Preston snapped. "Being a hunter is supposed to be difficult, not a constant state of fucking misery. What the hell are you and Sandro up to now? I'd had three hours of sleep when Richard dragged me to his damn party, I was nearly bitten, then suddenly I have to spend seven hours going from California to here and you tell me I look awful? Fuck you." He buried his head in his arms again.



Fingers, long and thin and warm, stroked through his short-cropped hair, caressing lightly over the back of his neck before tracing the length of his spine. "Ah, hunter. I fear we are over fond of you."

Preston snorted at that. "Whatever," he said with a yawn. "What the hell did you want?"

"Perhaps it can wait a bit," Tremont said with a faint smile - rare for him. Tremont was better at frowning or pouting than smiling. "You should rest. I like to bend my pretty hunter, not break."

"Not yours," Preston muttered.

The fingers on his back suddenly pressed hard enough to hurt. Preston jerked in surprise and looked up. "What?"

"To whom do you belong?" Tremont asked coldly.

"No one," Preston snapped. "I belong to myself, because I'm too fucking busy babysitting goddamn vamps who wake me up and summon me from across the fucking country all because they're so wrapped up in pissing each other off they don't care how that behavior affects everyone around them. I don't belong to anyone because I'm too busy catering to your pissing contests."

Too angry now to hold still, Preston stood and stalked to the door. "I don't give a fuck what's wrong this time. Fix it yourself. If you spill too much blood I'll have your permits revoked." Yanking the door open, he stalked to the elevator and mashed the button.

He yelped as he was abruptly yanked back, oofing as his forehead collided with Tremont's jaw. "Let me go," he said when he was reasonably certain of his balance.

Instead Tremont kissed him again. Preston attempted to struggle free, but it was a half-hearted attempt at best and he knew it. He moaned softly as he let the kiss go deep, holding fast to Tremont's upper arms.

The thought of what his family would do if they caught him kissing vampires was enough to make his blood freeze, but he would be lying if he said Tremont's kiss wasn't devastating.

He pushed Tremont away after a moment, and reached out blindly to mash the elevator button again. "Did you take another toy, Tremont?"

"He took mine actually," Tremont said. "You should stay and rest, hunter."

Preston shook his head. "No. I'm not going to get any dumber, and I'm tired of being toyed with." That's all he was, and he needed to remember that. Hadn't his uncle said that was the hardest part of their job? Keeping the distance, because tops liked to cross lines and break rules - and play with their hunters.

He ignored Tremont's calling his name, stepping into the elevator before he could be snatched back again. The doors closed with a chime, and he let out a long sigh.

Several hours and a great many cups of coffee later, he let himself into Alessandro's penthouse.

Alessandro was waiting for him, looking like a cat that still had feathers clinging to his mouth. His smirk, however, faded as Preston drew close. "You look terrible, hunter."

"Yeah, I wonder why?" Preston snapped. "No fucking thanks to you, I'm pushing twenty four hours without sleep. Where the fuck is Tremont's toy?"

Instead of answering, Alessandro glared. "Richard bit you."

"He nipped me, and that has nothing to do with this. I can fucking take care of myself." Preston grimaced at himself. He was obviously exhausted if he was cussing more and more. "Give up the damned toy."

Alessandro yanked him close, fingers going immediately to the livid red marks on his neck. "You are not his to touch," he growled, fingers tightening around Preston's throat, not quite enough to hurt.

"I'm not yours either," Preston snapped.

"Hmm," Alessandro said, frowning.

He about to be kissed, and Preston suddenly didn't want to deal with it. Tremont's kisses still weighed heavily on his mind,

and he knew all too well how Alessandro's would feel.

Tired and tired of it.

He shoved Alessandro away, somewhat gratified at the look of surprise on the too-handsome face. "I'm not yours. I'm not Tremont's. I'm not Richard's. I'm just a fucking hunter, and while I know being manhandled comes with the territory - that doesn't mean I belong to anyone. I have no interest in being a drained corpse somewhere, and I certainly have no interest in being the snack you and Tremont steal back and forth. Go to hell. Give Tremont's toy back, and you can both stop fucking calling me over your asinine squabbles."

Turning sharply around, he stalked to the door.

A hand landed on his shoulder and that was finally enough. Snapping around, the flash of light on silver was the only warning Alessandro got before Preston shoved him back against the nearest wall with sharp silver pressed against his throat, another one jabbing at his gut. "I've had it, vampire," he snarled. "Just because I play along doesn't mean I'm your damned toy. Leave. Me. Alone. Understand?"

Alessandro nodded as best he could with a knife to his throat.

Preston stowed the knives as quickly as he'd drawn them, then once more turned away to leave.

He was so fucking done with this shit.

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Twenty nine missed calls from Alessandro. Twenty nine from Tremont.

Preston sighed and set his phone back down on the nighstand. To hell with them. Regulations said he had to check on the bastards once a month. He generally saw them at least once a week. That meant he could keep right on ignoring them for a bit. Two weeks, and he was perfectly happy to go two more at least.

Except, maybe, for the part where he was barely sleeping.

Nothing new about that, he supposed.

Sighing, Preston sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed, scrubbing a hand through his hair. He glanced at the alarm clock: 1:00 AM.

Obviously he wasn't getting much sleep tonight either. Ah, well. By now Richard's stupid party should be over. Why not make a surprise visit?

Standing, he stripped off his sleep pants and wife beater, tugging on jeans and t-shirt. From the chair in the corner of his small, stale hotel room he retrieved his knife belts. The longest of his knives rest right between his shoulder blades. Two more rest at the small of his back, with small daggers strapped to each forearm.

Silver gleamed in the light from the streetlamps slipping through the curtains before he sheathed them. Shrugging into a lightweight leather jacket, he sat down to pull on his boots, then snatched up his keys and wallet.

The night was nice, probably too warm for his jacket but he preferred not to flash his blades if he could help it. A night like this...

Preston shook his head irritably. It didn't matter. He was a hunter. A top level hunter, at that. Precious few of those managed any sort of personal life. He'd known that full and well when he'd decided to be the most difficult type of hunter.

It was quiet. Too quiet. Preston was torn between heaving a sigh and rolling his eyes.

Instead he settled for slowing down and nicking his arm. In the dark, his blood was a black smudge on gleaming silver.

He stopped at an intersection, right beneath a streetlight and a worn out bus stop sign. Waited, hands itching for blades. Better to do without for now, but they itched all the same.

Luckily, he didn't have to wait long. What he did see and smell surprised him, however. He'd expected an average, a lackey sent by either Sandro or Tremont.

He hadn't expected Richard.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"You didn't come to my party," Richard said.

Preston snatched his hand out of reach when Richard made a grab at it. He stuck his wrist in his mouth, licking away the drying blood there. "Why are you tailing me, Richard? I was on my way to see you."

"Rumor has it you're avoiding your tops, hunter."

"What I do or don't do is none of your business. I'm the one who keeps an eye on your life, not the other way around. You should not be out at this hour; any low level hunter out and about would be perfectly within his rights to regard you as a threat. I'm regarding you as a threat."

Richard smirked and moved a little closer. "You didn't come to my party; I thought you might be ignoring me too...but I was informed you were here, and came to see you for myself...so are you choosing me over those idiots on the east coast? California is much nicer."

Preston was getting a headache. "Choose? What in the hell are you talking about? Do vampires live for centuries just to perfect the art of being confusing and annoying?"

He jerked away and stepped back as Richard tried to touch him. "I am really not in the mood to play games, Richard. What the fuck do you want?"

"I would think that obvious, hunter," Richard said, a telltale gleam to his eyes.

Preston flexed his hands, ready to draw his knives in a moment. "Back the fuck off, bloodsucker. I'm not on your menu and you know damn good and well what will happen if you try to make me one."

Richard snarled and suddenly was close. Preston twisted away, drawing a knife, swinging up to catch Richard across the chest.

"Back off," he said. "I don't like you much, but I sure as fuck don't want to kill you."

"I don't want you for a meal, you stupid human," Richard said. "Don't you get that?" He grimaced in pain at the wound across his chest. A minor scratch, really, but the silver left a lingering burn. "I'd much rather fuck you than eat you, though I wouldn't mind both."

Preston would have rolled his eyes if he dared take them off Richard for a single second. "Whatever. I'm sick of telling you vamps I'm not one of your goddamn toys. I'm perfectly within my rights to kill you if you keep this shit up, Richard, and we both know I can." Five hundred years didn't mean the vampire had all the tricks.

"You have only yourself to blame for being both edible and stubborn. All the vamps you watch, you never paid any mind except to those two and me."

"You're an asshole, and one who has come close to losing his permit more than once - just in the last century," Preston snapped.

Richard took a step closer, but held his hands up in surrender when Preston lifted his knives in warning. "So why did you come here after blowing off those nitwits? I had hoped you were finally choosing me."

Preston had a headache. "Choose you for what?" he asked, baffled. "I'm a fucking hunter, my job is to make certain you stay within bounds of your permit. You want me to be your fuck toy? Go to hell."

"You hunters think you're so smart, but you're really pretty stupid," Richard said, pinching the bridge of his nose, and it wasn't even remotely fair that he looked as frustrated as Preston felt.

"I resent that," Preston snapped. "What is going on?"

"Has it ever puzzled you nitwit hunters as to why we, as you say, toy with you so much? It does not make much sense that we harass those who have the power to not only take away our permits, but kill us."

Preston shrugged. "A lot about vampires doesn't make sense to me, and I've given up asking. We've always taken it to be you guys playing with your watchdogs."

"Some, yes," Richard said. "Some, like you, we would like to keep. Hunters are a cut above other humans. You have to be to keep pace with us. No other human would ever have taken a knife to me as easily as you did."

"Save the fucking compliments," Preston snapped. "That oil slick voice might con others, Richard, but I'm only getting more irritated. So you're saying I'm special, not just some toy. So what the hell am I then?"

"Strong," Richard said. "Physical, mental, everything. Far more than a pet or a toy, hunter."

Preston tightened his grip on his knives. "So what does that make me? A three course dinner?"

Richard heaved a long sigh. "A companion."

"Fuck that," Preston snapped. "Cats don't take rats or mice as companions." He jerked his head sharply as Richard tried to keep talking. "We're done here. Get the fuck back to your house and I don't want to hear about you being out after hours again. Got it?"

"Hunter-"

"I said, got it?"

"Got it," Richard said sourly. "You should lighten up, hunter. It would do you wonders."

"Whatever. Get lost, Richard."

He waited beneath the streetlight as Richard slowly walked away, waited until he could not smell anything but the faintest lingering traces, then finally sheathed his weapons and strode back to his hotel room.

Packing his things quickly, he called the front desk to get him a cab.

Almost as an afterthought, he looked at his call log. After storming off two weeks ago, he'd flipped it to silent mode. Thirty one calls from Alessandro and Tremont. They were getting more frequent.

He wondered if they were calling to apologize, or bitch. Obviously they hadn't killed each other while he was ignoring them. Well, he'd give them another week or so to rot. See if they did kill each other.

What the hell had Richard been going on about? He'd been doing his damndest not to think about it. Companion? Strong?

It made a certain amount of sense, really... Vampires needed to feed. Broken and average vamps tended not to care at all who they sucked on. Tops, however...they didn't need to feed often, but when they did feed they needed to feed well. Regular blood - that is, from the same source as often as possible - was best for their systems. The toys they clung to had good blood and were able to endure being heavily drained over a period of months. Most toys didn't last past three or four months.

A hunter...hmm...he'd never thought of it that way. Hunters were a cut above the rest. That's what made them hunters. If a vampire snacked on a hunter...

That would explain why the fuckers kept trying to bite him, but not why they kept molesting him.

Fuck it. He was tired. He was going home. He was ignoring Alessandro and Tremont until they either learned to behave or killed each other. Then he'd figure out what to do about Richard. Castration, maybe.

Hefting his bag, he slung it over his shoulder and headed downstairs to catch his cab.

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Whatever he'd expected upon entering his tiny apartment, it wasn't the sight of Alessandro and Tremont sitting in his living room quietly talking.

He dropped his duffle bag and drew a knife, just because he was in a bad mood and jetlagged and really not in the mood to sort out who needed to give back what and why he shouldn't kill them both. "What in the hell are you doing here?" he asked.

"We've been trying to talk to you," Alessandro said with the careful patience he only used when he was really pissed. "Ignoring our phone calls for two weeks running is a bit like that childish behavior of which you're always accusing us, don't you think?"

Preston snorted. "I've put up with it for years. Deal. And get out of my apartment."

Tremont shook his head and stood up, crossing the room to stand in front of him, followed by Alessandro. "We came to talk to you, hunter."

"Send me an email," Preston said, sheathing his knife. Damn it. He wanted to be left alone. Did no one get that? He was tired of all this crap. "I've had more than my fill of vampires tonight, I don't need your stupid games after fighting off Richard."

Both vampires made the weird sound that was a bloodsucker truly riled - something that was part growl, part hiss, and completely nonhuman.

"I will kill him," Tremont snarled. "He's been warned before to keep his hands to himself."

Alessandro nodded in agreement. "The likes of that one has no right to you."

Preston almost drew his knife again. "I am not some damned toy to which any of you has a claim, I don't care how appealing as a pet or a toy or a companion or whatever I might be. What makes you think you have any right to act like that? I'm a fucking hunter. I'm in charge, not you. Now get the fuck out of my apartment."

"You must really be in a snit," Tremont said with one of his familiar pouts, "if you're not even noticing that we're getting along."

That drew Preston up short. He stared at them. "Why are the two of you here? Together? Not killing each other." Had someone forgotten to tell him hell had frozen over?

"Oh, we were fighting until about a week ago," Alessandro said, sharing a look with Tremont that Preston didn't quite follow. "We were each convinced the other was to blame for your completely walking away."

Preston rolled his eyes. "I was sick of you both. Richard is an ass, Belle is a bitch, but you two are the bane of my existence."

"Yet you're not nearly as harsh with us as you are with Richard and Belle," Tremont said with a gleam in his eyes that only ever spelled trouble. "After we paused long enough in trying to kill each other over you, we realized something rather interesting."

"What was that?" Preston asked warily, itching to take a step back - but that would show weakness, which right now was the last thing he wanted to show.

Alessandro smirked. "You're always telling us to either kill each other or share, hunter. There was something you neglected to tell us, however."

Preston frowned, not liking the way they both looked like they were up to something, because it was one thing when they were only trying to piss each other off - he wondered if maybe their getting along was the right idea after all. "What?"

One second they were in front of him, the next he had Tremont in front of him, Alessandro behind him - and two sets of teeth just barely scraping the skin of his throat. Preston drew a sharp breath.

"Apparently," Alessandro murmured in his ear, "we have been sharing you all along."

Preston didn't even try to move. Any direction he tried to go, there were teeth or hands in the way. He held as still as he could, feeling way too much like a canary pounced by two tomcats.

Tremont lapped at his lips in that disconcerting way he had. "Maybe you just let every vampire under your care kiss you. Hmm? Is that it?"

"I most certainly do not," Preston snapped, resenting the implication.

Then he swore, as he realized what exactly he'd just given up.

Soft chuckles washed over him, pleased and entirely too smug.

"Let me go," he said sharply.

"No," Alessandro said, and Preston shivered despite himself as a tongue dragged across the back of his neck, followed by

the nip of sharp teeth.

He glared at Tremont, who only stared back with a smirk Preston was itching to knock right off his face. "What in the hell do the two of you think you're doing?"

"Sharing," they chorused.

Preston opened his mouth to demand a better explanation of that bizarre statement when Tremont kissed him. He might have been able to resist it, for he'd resisted Tremont's kisses before - but they'd never been coupled with Alessandro's hands, which were suddenly shoving up under his t-shirt to explore his chest with entirely too much liberty.

He heard a long moan, and realized suddenly it came from him, but his thoughts skittered away again as two hands became four and Alessandro resumed lavishing attention on the back of Preston's neck.

This was not happening.

Tremont was suddenly gone, and the lack of kissing left Preston momentarily startled - then he was abruptly turned and kissing Alessandro instead, and he moaned loudly at the difference. He'd always compared them, but to have them both here and to compare so immediately and intimately...

It needed to stop before he completely forgot that this shouldn't be happening. They were vampires. He was a hunter.

He finally broke away with a gasp, pushing and grabbing and cussing until he finally wrenched free. Panting, he looked at them - then hastily looked away. "What the fuck is going on here? When I said share, I didn't mean me. It doesn't even make sense. You get pissy when Richard touches me but you'll both share me with each other? Is that supposed to make sense? Because it doesn't."

They shared a look, and he was never going to get used to seeing Alessandro and Tremont in the same room and not just getting along but cooperating.

Alessandro spoke first. "As we said, we spent the first week after you walked out trying to kill each other. I think it safe to say we have both been more than a little interested in you for a long time."

"Is this like that companion crap Richard was talking about?" Preston asked.

"Yes," Tremont said, looking a little startled. "You should know better than anyone that vampires favor feeding from one source for as long as possible. What would possibly make a better source than someone of hunter caliber? This used to be a well known fact, but times change..."

"That still doesn't explain why you were - not fighting over me." Because they weren't sharing him, that sort thing never actually happened and there was no way he'd kind of liked it he didn't care how hard his cock might still be.

"We did, for a week straight. If you had not been ignoring us, you would have realized that," Alessandro said, looking both annoyed and amused.

"Then we figured out we were both in the same dilemma, and we didn't like you ignoring us, and likely the only way we would get you back was by cooperating long enough to do that," Tremont said, sharing another look with Alessandro.

Preston shook his head. "So just like that you started cooperating?"

"Oh, it wasn't that easy," Alessandro said. "We were still rather cross with each other - after all, we both wanted you. That's when we figured out that you'd been...rather tolerant of both of us. A few delicate inquiries made it clear you didn't tolerate kisses from any other vampires. Which left us with rather an interesting dilemma on our hands."

Tremont nodded. "Yes. We could force you to choose between us, but we didn't think that wise given you were already ignoring both of us."

"So..." Preston frowned.

Alessandro smirked. "Then we both recalled what you were always telling us. Kill each other or learn to share, as we've already stated. That's when we realized we already were sharing."

"That makes no fucking sense," Preston said. "You two love hating each other, and now you suddenly decide to stop because of me? I fail to see the logic." Though he definitely saw the pretty, the way they stood next to each other like that, mussed from their recent activities.



They moved toward him again, touching, and he meant to jerk away he did but oh he'd never been very good at rejecting their kisses. His brothers had it so much easier hunting broken vamps.

He whimpered as Alessandro kissed him hard, clinging to his shoulders for dear life. Fingers slipped beneath the waistband of his jeans and Preston jerked hard, eyes widening. He tore away from Alessandro's mouth to try and glare at someone. "This is a bad idea, you idiots. When I said you should learn to share, this is not what I meant."

"You belong to us, Preston," Tremont said firmly, nipping hard at the side of his throat. "It's decided."

Preston gasped. "It-impossible." He bit down hard on his lip against a moan as Alessandro proved to be far too clever with his damned fingers. "I'm a fucking hunter. You're vampires."

"You know it's only that black and white at the bottom," Alessandro murmured. "You'll have to try a less flimsy excuse."

"What about when you stop cooperating?" Preston asked softly, pulling away from them again. "This is stupid. You two have been fighting for what, two centuries? And it just magically goes away now because I ignore you for two weeks?"

Tremont shrugged. "Some things are more important than an amusing feud."

Alessandro nodded in agreement, oddly quiet.

Preston still wasn't buying it. "You really can't expect me to believe it. Give it a day and you'll be right back to your bickering and the only real change is that I'll be more thoroughly stuck in the middle than ever. Never mind this is a bad idea anyway."

The two vampires shared another look, then glanced briefly at him before looking at each other again and Preston had the impression they were giving a mental shrug.

Then he startled enough he almost fell over.

Oh, hell. Even his wildest imaginings had never come up with something that hot. Even in his own head he hadn't been crazy enough to picture Alessandro and Tremont kissing each other.

Now it was seared right into his brain, and he didn't think he'd forget it no matter what happened.

He shook his head in bewilderment when they finally broke apart.

Jeez. When he'd said they should either kill or fuck each other...not once had he ever actually thought they'd pick door number two.

And he was pretty damned certain he'd never once suggested himself as the human they should share, but he couldn't quite bring himself to fight them off when they pounced him again.

Still. He couldn't quite give up either. "Vampires. Hunter. Bad idea. Cats do not ever play with their mice in a good way."

Alessandro rolled his eyes. "I'm sick of this predator and prey nonsense humans go on about. Can a cat turn a mouse into a cat? No."

Preston blinked. He'd...never thought of it that way before. "Um-"

"Shut up, Preston," Tremont said, and it was all kinds of distracting the way they said his name now instead of simply 'hunter' and he tried, he really did try, to resist the consuming kiss that took his mouth, the way Tremont became Alessandro, the way kissing them became watching them kiss again and he rather thought he could come just watching that-

He sort of just stared, feeling dazed, as they came at him again. "My family is going to fucking kill me," he said, because his mother was seriously going to come after him with one of his own knives whenever she found out about this.

Something flashed in their eyes - hard and fierce, but he recognized it as vampires being possessive, protective. "You belong to us, Preston," Alessandro said firmly. He smirked. "It's the duty of a top hunter to keep the peace amongst top vampires, yes?"

"Yes," Preston said, and he was not smiling - except he was, and perhaps even fondly. "Though I sense if I'm going to be this companion thing or whatever to the two of you, then I'm going to be the reason you start up a feud with Richard."

They pounced him, making that weird growl-hiss noise, one behind, one in front. This time there was nothing teasing or gentle about their teeth as they bit down. He jerked, crying out in pain, but the arms that held him firmly in place were gentle and somehow comforting.

Almost as quickly as they'd bit him they stopped, and pain turned to pleasure as teeth were replaced by lips and the dizzying kisses resumed.

"Ours," Tremont said quietly, but with steel in his voice. "We'll share with each other, but no one else. Understand, hunter?"

Preston smiled despite himself, tired of arguing. If they were finally getting along, who was he to protest? This was better than their bitching, definitely. "Yeah," he said.

They both made noises of agreement and approval, then fell to proving just how well they had learned to share.

## The Housekeeper

Trevor was in love with Richard.

The problem was that Richard barely knew he was alive.

Richard signed his paychecks and every now and then he actually seemed to really see Trevor. Not for very long, however, and it always seemed perfunctory, automatic. Like maybe he didn't really see Trevor after all.

There were, Trevor had determined after many a day of pondering and sighing, three main reasons Richard would never notice him in a million years.

One, he was human.

Two, he was a boring human.

Three, he was an unattractive, boring human.

Sighing softly, Trevor finished drying off the last of the plates and put it with the others, then closed the cupboard. Draining the sink, he scrubbed it clean, and finished the kitchen by giving all the counters one last wipe down.

As Richard's housekeeper, his duties included cleaning, shopping, and taking care of Richard's pets. The latest had been finished with only the previous day, and Trevor had seen him well fed before the vamps took him off to toss him back into the sea of normal life.

Thinking of the discarded pet drew out another sigh. A pretty young man, with cinnamon curls and pale blue eyes. Trevor tugged dismally at his own straw-blond hair and wished his stupid eyes were anything except boring hazel. That he had a build that appealed to Richard, since being a swimmer apparently wasn't good enough. More color in his skin would be nice, but working for vamps left little room for sunning or even tanning.

The clock on the wall chimed six o'clock, and a moment later Trevor heard the brush of a door against carpet. No other sounds reached his ears, but not a minute later Richard appeared from the hallway, padding slowly toward the bar that divided the kitchen from the sitting area. He slid onto a barstool and yawned.

Trevor hastily looked away, focusing on his chores, going through cabinets and cupboards to see what he needed to buy at the store later. If he snuck glances here and there...well, he was only human.

Richard was definitely worth looking at. He always was, but now more than any other time. Everyone else saw Richard polished and pressed, sharp and shining. All the parties he hosted, all those he attended - Richard cut a fine figure, dominating the nightlife of his small slice of California.

Yet Trevor had always thought him far more appealing in these brief moments. The one thing Richard did not do well was wake up. It took him at least an hour before he was well and truly awake, and if he had two hours that was infinitely preferable.

There was nothing sharp and calculating about this Richard. His hair was a mess, scattered in twenty directions from sleep and Richard's absently raking it away from his face. The dark blue pants and tank top he wore clung to his slender frame, rumpled from sleep. Best of all were the eyes - soft and muddled while Richard slowly joined the waking world, a deep,

warm brown rather than the more usual near-black.

Normally Richard sat there for a half hour or so before he began to stir. If he was in the mood to feed, he'd summon his latest pet. Usually, however, he just moved to the sitting room and stretched out on the couch for another half hour.

Anyone else, that would have been going back to sleep, but Richard actually seemed to wake up while he lay there.

Lately, however, that hadn't been the routine at all. More often than not nowadays he simply went back to bed. Ever since the hunter Richard had wanted had chosen someone else, Richard hadn't been the same. There hadn't been a party to clean up after for going on two months now. The most noticeable change, however, was that Richard usually preferred to keep his pets around for at least three months. These days he kept them maybe a week before insisting upon a change.

He wasn't playing in the slightest. Everyone saw Richard as a cruel and calculating playboy...but Trevor wondered how much of that was genuine. Oh, he wasn't crushing so bad he saw no wrong in the vampire of his affections. Richard could be an asshole, and often was one with relish.

Still, it was hard not to see more than a little good in a guy who looked borderline adorable draped mostly-asleep across the countertop, and who paid all his people well and never minded their taking days off. Richard threw his lavish parties, but he took care of the guests who attended. His pets were well treated, if thoroughly used. He was a hard ass, no doubt there. Trevor had seen too many hurt and angry ex-lovers (ex-amusements, Richard called them) to deny that...but still.

Part of him wished Richard had gotten the hunter he was obviously moping about. Mostly, though, he was selfishly relieved. Richard would never be his - the idea of him noticing his lowly little human housekeeper was laughable - but at least Richard didn't really belong to anyone else either.

Trevor pushed up his glasses and pulled open the drawer that held his miscellany, grabbing out a notepad and pen, jotting down the stuff he needed to buy, notes for errands he needed to run.

He started to leave the kitchen, but hesitated. No talking was the usual way of things. He'd never dared break the silence, and Richard certainly wouldn't when he was still for all intents and purposes asleep. "Anything you need while I'm out, boss?" He jumped at the sound of his own voice, and that just made him feel stupid. He could feel his cheeks burn - and they only got hotter when Richard actually looked at him.

Not much, really. Richard had his head propped on his upper arm, the forearm draped over the top of his head. He didn't move his head, but his eyes flicked to regard Trevor for a moment.

Then he simply turned away, shifting to pillow his head on both arms.

That would be a no, then. Trevor stifled his disappointment. What had he really expected?

Leaving the kitchen and his gloomy boss, he snagged his denim jacket from one of the hooks by the door and let himself out, going over his lists one last time as he rode the elevator down.

Outside, night had well and truly fallen. Nearly seven now, not a hint of sun remained in the city. There was nothing but the city lights, people milling all about - people and more than a few vampires.

A handful of them gave him a considering look, but every last one dismissed him in the end. Part of it was that he kept his blood unappealing - mostly with garlic, which just did not get on well with vampire systems, but there was plenty of other stuff in the mix - but mostly it was that no one would mess with someone marked as being in the employ of Richard Freeman.

Trevor glanced at the scar on his wrist, a long scratch made by Richard that essentially said 'back the fuck off' to anyone who might have otherwise turned Trevor into a midnight snack.

The paltry scratch was nothing like the bite he really wanted; livid scars on his neck to proclaim that he didn't work for Richard - he belonged to Richard. But he was a lowly human fit only for housekeeping. Nothing even remotely like the beautiful hunter after whom Richard still seemed to be pining.

He yawned as he reached the grocery store, grabbing a cart and pushing it toward the aisles. His hours were nine am to nine pm, so he was available for errands, the setup of the parties, everything - he generally went to bed just as the parties were starting, after he was certain the staff hired to manage it knew what they were doing. He started early enough the following day to ensure everything was once again spotless when Richard woke up. He had four days off a month, and could request more if he needed them.

Outside of his life managing Richard's home, his interests were swimming and video games. His collection of vampire-related games was impressive and vastly entertaining. Maybe he could play one when he got off the clock. Chances were Richard would go right back to his room, and he'd never cared when Trevor borrowed the sitting room TV.

Maybe Richard would go out tonight. Trevor wasn't exactly looking forward to when Richard resumed his games...but he'd rather that than the state of misery in which Richard currently resided. Such melancholy didn't suit him at all.

Sighing at himself, Trevor made quick work of the shopping. Normally he did it during the daylight hours, but he'd gotten caught up doing other things and then suddenly it had been nearly time for Richard to wake up and he always tried to be home for that.

Hurrying up, he finished with his shopping and grabbed a taxi back to the building.

The clock was chiming nine by the time he had everything put away and tidied up, and he gave the house one last look over before going down the hall to his room. Shucking off his clothes, he showered quickly and then tugged on sweatpants and an old t-shirt that he could not quite bring himself to get rid of.

He hadn't seen so much as a hint of Richard since getting home, which meant he'd just gone back to bed. Disappointing, but Trevor had no clue how to help. Well, not completely true. He could certainly understand what it was like not to have the one you loved, but then again - Richard had tried and failed to get his precious hunter. Trevor had never so much as tried to get Richard.

Still, heartache he understood. He just...didn't know how to tell the boss that without saying way more than he should. Richard probably didn't want sympathy from his housekeeper anyway.

Scrubbing half-heartedly at his hair with a towel, Trevor perused his collection of vampire video games. Finally he picked an old favorite, one with extremely pretty vampires and hunters who favored whips.

In the kitchen, he poured a glass of orange juice and grabbed a bag of chips, then carried it all into the sitting room. Setting his snacks down, he got the TV, system, and everything running, then settled down on the floor with his back against the couch, legs stretched out in front of him.

Sometime later he heard a sharp crack of laughter and let out a startled cry, controller tumbling from his hands. On screen, the boss he'd been fighting slaughtered him.

Trevor only made note of his sudden loss from habit; every other fiber of his being was focused on the source of the laughter that had cost him a victory. He twisted around, rising to his knees, and smiled sheepishly. "Hey, boss. Didn't expect to see you again tonight."

Richard slowly moved his eyes from the television screen, and Trevor's breath caught to see that there was amusement in them. They weren't dazed with sleep or hard like usual or flat as they had been of late.

"Should I take it as problematic," Richard asked, mouth quirking in a further show of amusement, "that my housekeeper spends his time playing games that apparently entail killing vampires?"

Trevor flushed. "No-that's not-"

Richard laughed.

He was torn between pleasure at hearing Richard laugh, excitement that he'd been the one to draw out that laugh - and mortification as to the reason.

"Humans are amusing," Richard said when he'd finally stopped laughing. "A whip of all things. I do not think that would get you very far. I shall have to ask the hunter what he thinks."

Just like that his amusement died, and Trevor could see thoughts of the hunter overtaking him.

No, no, no. Trevor struggled for something to say. "There's also holy water. And crosses."

"I thought those had finally gone out of fashion," Richard said. "It's been a good fifty years since anyone tried to throw holy water on me." Annoyance flickered briefly across his face. "Thankfully, as they'd ruin my good suits throwing water all about."

Trevor laughed. "Better they throw water than champagne, though, boss." That particular incident had been one of Richard's ex-amusements. Afterwards, the man had vanished. Trevor knew better than to examine the matter too closely.

"Very true," Richard replied, grimacing again.

Then he threw Trevor completely for a loop by moving around the couch and dropping down into it. He stretched his long legs out and folded his arms across his chest, eyes on the TV for a moment before he finally turned to Trevor. "Well?"

"Uh-" Trevor blinked. "You want me to keep playing?"

Richard shrugged, eyes sliding back to the screen. "It's amusing."

Trevor nodded and retrieved his controller, then resumed his seat.

Licking his lips, trying to focus on the game and not the long legs close enough to touch, he selected 'continue' and went for round two with the boss.

It was just after two in the morning when Richard suddenly stood up, and vanished down the hallway after a brief, firm touch to Trevor's shoulder.

Trevor sighed, suddenly feeling all the exhaustion he'd ignored so long as Richard was there with him - talking, laughing, making an occasional joke. It wasn't a side of Richard he'd ever seen, except in too-brief passing moments. This Richard was like the sleepy version, only completely awake.

A pity it was already over. Trevor would have cheerfully given up a night's sleep to spend those hours playing silly games just to amuse Richard. Oh, well.

Yawning, he shut everything down and then carried his glass and chips into the kitchen. Putting the glass in the dishwasher, the chips back in the cupboard, and seeing that all was well, he turned out the lights and wandered down the hall to his own room.

He couldn't help casting a brief look at the door to the master suite, as firmly shut as always. Succumbing to another yawn, he stripped out of his t-shirt as he entered his room, and did not bother to do anything but fall into bed.

\*~\*~\*

"You have to jump," Trevor said, motioning uselessly. "Not there! Over! No, the other way! Ha-there, I told you so."

Richard scowled at the screen. "Seems like a bloody stupid way to construct a castle. Why would anyone put a wall in such a place?"

Trevor laughed and took the controller Richard absently held out. Quickly he did exactly what he'd been trying to tell Richard to do. "There," he said, handing the controller back. "Now be careful, and stop wasting potions."

"I cannot help it if my thirty-two bit ancestors are bloody cheaters," Richard muttered, glaring at the screen.

"More fun to cheat than be cheated?" Trevor asked, unable to resist laughing again.

"Precisely," Richard said, but the rest of his retort was lost to a growl as he was abruptly attacked by a hoard of zombies. A minute later the growl had faded into a smirk. "Take that, you stupid zombies."

Trevor shook his head, falling back against the couch laughing harder than ever. "The vampire has become the hunter."

Richard made a face and tossed the controller at him. "If being a vampire required I dress like that, I'd want a hunter to kill me too. Your turn."

Catching the controller, Trevor mashed the button to start the next level.

It took more effort than he liked to admit to keep his eyes on the game and not on Richard.

He'd thought that first night had been a one time thing...but every night since Richard had reappeared to watch him play, and on the fifth night Trevor had dared to ask if he wanted to try playing.

Eleven nights running, now, and Richard was getting pretty good at killing vampires.

Trevor wondered why Richard was bothering, but he wasn't going to voice the question. He wasn't going to say a single damned word that might take these unexpected nights away from him. They wouldn't last forever, so he wanted them to last as long as possible.

"It looks so simple when you do it," Richard groused. "Yet every time I try it, I wind up dead."

"Takes practice," Trevor said. "First time I played this one, there were times I threw the controller around in sheer frustration. There's one game I still can't beat." He turned away from the TV to grin at Richard. "I'll bring it out next time we play."

Richard nodded, then returned his attention to the screen, occasionally making a snarky comment about the vampires and hunters whenever they talked.

A few minutes later he handed the controller back to Richard. "Here, this is an easy fight. You do it."

Looking utterly unconvinced by the assurance of an easy fight, Richard nevertheless accepted the controller.

Chuckling, Trevor snatched up his glass and stood, making his way to the kitchen.

He turned his head as Richard swore loudly at the screen - and promptly tripped on the small step leading up into the kitchen from the sitting room. He landed hard, swearing loudly as pain cut through him - and realized that he hadn't let go of the glass he'd been holding.

The hand which had held the glass was now a bloody mess. Trevor sat up awkwardly, grimacing at the sight. Yuck. He wasn't squeamish about blood, but his hand was not a pretty sight. It really fucking hurt, too.

Reaching up, he grabbed the counter with his good hand and hauled himself up - only to collide with something.

Someone. He turned around to see he'd collided with Richard - whose eyes were only for his bleeding hand, nose slightly wrinkled.

"Sorry, boss," Trevor said. "I'll get everything cleaned up."

Richard didn't reply, simply reached out to take his hand. There was no missing his fangs, not this close, nor the way his eyes had turned near-black. Trevor realized suddenly that Richard had not fed recently...so unappealing or not, his blood was bound to stir a reaction.

He stood still, too surprised to do anything else, as Richard simply began to pick the glass from his hand as carefully as possible. It hurt, oh good lord did it hurt and that was way too much blood-

Then Richard lifted his hand up and began to clean away the blood with as much care as he'd shown in picking out the glass and Trevor could only stand and stare and try not to freak out or move closer or anything.

It was hell, because Richard wasn't missing a single damned part of his hand at all. When he finally released it, Trevor could not do more than the same staring he'd been doing the entire time.

His hand was almost as good as new. Wet, sticky, but red with healing rather than blood. He tested it gingerly, but there was nothing but a faint soreness remaining. Smiling, he looked up. "Um - thanks, boss."

Richard shrugged the words off. "Take more care."

"Ah-my blood-you won't get sick, will you?"

"Sick?" Richard asked, looking confused. Then the expression cleared. "No. I admit your blood does not taste terribly good, but I'm too old for such tricks to make me sick. Best see that hand is good to go, and then clean up in here. Good night."

"Good night," Trevor replied, but Richard was already walking away.

Sighing, he glanced at the TV - where Richard had lost the fight, probably because he'd stopped right in the middle to help his clumsy housekeeper.

Trevor stared again at his hand, trying and failing not to think about the mouth and tongue which had lavished such extensive attention upon it - but in a wholly impersonal fashion, and with the added comment that his blood really did taste awful.

Moving to the sink, he moved mechanically through the motions of washing his hand, then fetched what he needed to clean up any glass remaining on the floor. Next he cleaned the sitting room, gave the kitchen another once over, and finally turned out the lights before heading down the hall.



As he reached his room, Richard came out of the master suite.

Gone were the faded jeans and white t-shirt, the rumpled hair and laid back manner.

No, the Richard of the past few days was gone. In his place stood the more familiar Richard - black slacks, deep maroon shirt, hair neatly combed, a single gold stud in one ear to match the pin in his black and gold tie.

Beautiful. Untouchable. Clearly on the prowl.

Trevor nodded to him as Richard passed, but he didn't even get so much as a glance in return.

Inside, he shut his door and moved stiffly to his bed.

He stared at his hand. Faint scars were scattered about it, from the larger pieces of glass. It still ached, but by morning there would likely be no pain at all. Not in his hand, anyway. Damn it.

It wasn't like he hadn't known...Richard had somehow been using the video games and crap to chill and recover and get over shit. Trevor's stupid damned falling and cutting himself had, it seemed, stirred the vampire from his slumber.

Richard had probably had to go out just to get rid of the taste of Trevor's blood.

Man, he couldn't win for losing. Just once he wished he could think of something to convince his boss to really and truly look at him. Or that he had the balls to simply walk up and say 'Look at me, you idiot. I'm better for you than any damned hunter.'

A better dishwasher, he thought bitterly. Errand runner. Video gamer buddy - but even that was now firmly and forever in the past. All because he'd tripped.

Making a rough sound, Trevor turned off his light and then threw himself into bed, tugging the blankets up.

He fell almost immediately to sleep, but woke up restlessly throughout the night. When he stirred at roughly five am, he could just barely hear Richard speaking. By the tone of his voice, he was soothing a snack.

The clock said he was due to be working in roughly four hours. Normally he got up soon, to do his own things before tending to the household...

Snatching up his pillow, Trevor dragged it over his head to block out the sounds coming from the living room.

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A break was exactly what he'd needed.

He didn't exactly feel better...but he felt less inclined to throw himself off a balcony. Richard, he could tell, hadn't been exactly thrilled that Trevor had asked for a week off but he wasn't the kind of boss to say no just because he could.

So here he was playing beach bum, alternating between swimming and watching the hot surfer boys.

He took a break for an early dinner and a nap, then went right back to the beach.

With moon rather than sun in the sky, tourists and locals alike had abandoned the sand for evening entertainments. No one remained but him and a handful of surfers. Technically the beach was closed, but the cops didn't care about a few familiar - well behaved - friendly faces.

It'd been how long since he'd taken some time for himself?

Too long, he supposed, to judge by the self-pity in which he'd been wallowing.

Not that he'd stopped wallowing, per se, he'd just managed to move back into the shallow end.

Shaking his head, refusing to think of anything but sand and surf, he stood and stretched, then moved back to the beach and waded into the water up to his thighs, then dove into the deep waters, kicking back to the surface and began to swim freestyle.

He stopped eventually, just when he start to feel he'd had enough, and swam back to the beach.

Stopped short as he realized two of the surfers were standing by his towel.

"It's awfully late for even a beachhead human to be out swimming," said the shorter of the two.

Trevor swore softly - how the hell had he missed two of the surfers were vampires? He also noticed rather belatedly that the other surfers had long gone home. He hoped they'd gone home. Otherwise, it was likely they had served as one meal and were now feeding the fish.

"Back off," he said. "I work for Richard Freeman."

The vampires laughed. "You do not."

Trevor glared at them. "The fuck I don't, and I know damn good and well you can smell it."

"We can smell he's healed you, and was rather thorough about it," the taller vampire said, drawing close. "You smell too good to be an employee, beachhead."

"Back off," Trevor snapped, but it was a futile effort and he knew it. Oh fuck, did he know it. Shit. Richard's healing him must have somehow negated the 'don't touch' on his wrist, and of course he hadn't noticed, and Richard obviously had been too busy thinking about other things...

He stepped back, wishing stupidly that he was not so defenseless. Obviously he was way too used to Richard's protection, if he'd gotten so fucking lazy. He wasn't stupid enough to walk around unarmed...but he had been stupid enough to leave his gun in his bag while he went swimming.

Swearing, he weighed his options - become food, or make a run for it first.

Fuck if he was going to be anything but fast food.

He bolted, running as fast as his feet would carry him, surprise alone carrying him past the vampires and up the beach, sand and then cement beneath his feet, and he wondered if by the end of this he would be able to walk.

If he was lucky enough to be alive, and not a broken vamp, he didn't particularly give a fuck.

He'd just reached the parking lot when they caught him, and stars flashed behind his eyes as his head connected with the hood of a car that was probably ridiculously expensive. Weren't they always in cases like this?

He groaned as he was yanked back up, then turned and shoved against the car. It was cold against his back, and his feet did fucking hurt, and was he really going to die a vampire snack after all the hard work-

The teeth sank into his neck, and oh god did that hurt and it wasn't fair that it happened like this. The hands holding him in place were painfully tight, rendering his struggles futile, tears stinging his eyes as he recalled hazily there were two of them. It was going to be a long and painful night.

His vision had dulled to a fuzzy gray when he heard the second vampire scream in pain. The report of the gun was jarring and loud as it echoed through the parking lot. It echoed a second time, and Trevor found himself on the ground. The vampires lay close by.

"Hey, buddy," a voice said, and he was turned over, his cheek gently smacked. "You'll be okay."

Trevor tried to speak, but it only came out a shaky sound that was either a laugh or a sob.

"Stay with me, buddy," the man said, and something about him looked vaguely familiar.

He heard a whine, a soft chuff, and turned his head a bit to see a massive ass dog - German shepherd, maybe - standing by the dead vampire, sniffing it thoroughly.

The familiar stranger was speaking again, and with an effort Trevor turned his head back to him. "I..." he licked his lips, or thought he did. He was so damned tired.

"What's your name?"

"Trevor..."

"Trevor, stay with me, okay? You're going to be alright."

He blinked to clear his vision, or something, but his eyes refused to open. His rescuer's voice came from far away, orders

and commands and pleading to stay with him, to talk, to answer questions.

It took all the strength he had left, but Trevor dragged his eyes open again. "Richard..."

"What?" the man asked.

Trevor passed out.

He woke with a start, chased into consciousness by shadows with sharp teeth and bruising hands. Gasping, choking on a scream, he struggled to take firm grip of the real world.

The world slowly took the form of a stale hotel room, complete with dingy carpet and tacky flower bedspread, lights that were more yellow than white, and a TV that had probably been made in the eighties.

Groaning, he slumped back down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Where was he?

Vampires had attacked him on the beach... Trevor shuddered at the memory and covered his face with his hands. He shouldn't be this shook up over a couple of fucking bites - except they'd bitten with every intention of a total draining, that had been pretty clear.

Still, he worked for a vampire. Being scared of vampire bites when his employer was a vampire was like...like...it was fucking stupid.

He pulled his hands away from his face and slowly sat up, grimacing in pain as the wounds at his neck throbbed. Where was he and how had he gotten here?

Oh, right. Someone had saved him. A guy with a dog or something. Maybe he'd imagined most or all of that. He really didn't remember much of anything past the first bite, the way they'd held so tight they'd probably left bruises...

Shuddering, he hugged himself and took a deep breath. Stupid, stupid, stupid. This should not be fazing him so much. Hell, it was probably what he deserved for getting lazy about his blood while on his impulse vacation.

Yeah, he wanted his blood to be more appealing to Richard. So maybe he'd sort of hoped there might be some chance of Richard noticing it before he was forced to make it unappealing again.

That would teach him to give in to his selfish, stupid, pointless impulses. Richard was back to playing, he wouldn't notice his housekeeper no matter the state of his blood.

Shit. Work. He'd been due back in the morning. What time was it?

He whipped his head around to the nightstand between the beds - and nearly tumbled off the bed from the wave of dizziness that resulted. Okay, moving quickly equaled bad idea. Slowly this time he glanced at the clock, which read 3:47.

AM or PM?

Squinting, he examined the little red dots alongside the numbers. His alarm clock had an indicator light that lit up when the time was PM. The one in the kitchen, however, lit up when the time was AM.

This seemed to be an AM clock, and the light wasn't lit, which meant it was now 3:48 PM.

Fuck. That meant he was almost eight hours late for work. Damn it.

Of course the phone would be all the way on the other side of the room. Why would it possibly be on the nightstand where phones normally were in hotel rooms. He wondered if his stuff was still on the beach, or if it had been snatched.

He snorted. Snatched, of course.

Groaning, he turned slowly over to bury his face in the stale-detergent scented pillow.

How long he sat there he didn't know, and he might have drifted off back to sleep, but the sound of the door opening jarred him fully awake and even a bit of dizziness did not keep him from looking up at what was likely his rescuer.

Oh.

He vaguely recalled thinking that his rescuer was familiar-looking...now he knew why. "You're related to Preston."

The man in the doorway paused, then his mouth quirked in a smile that was exactly like Preston. This had to be one of the brothers he mentioned from time to time. "Yeah, that I am. Name's Billie." He closed the door, then knelt and scratched the head of a massive German shepherd. "This is Helsing. He was the one who smelled trouble, otherwise I don't think I'd have found you until too late."

"Thank you," Trevor said. "I probably don't look it, but I'm deeply grateful not to be a bloodless corpse right now."

Billie smiled. "You won't be broken either, thankfully. They bit you hard and deep, but were too hungry to bother spreading anything. A day or so more of rest and you should be right as rain."

"Are the vampires dead?" Trevor asked, lightly touching fingers to the bandages on his neck.

"Mm, I killed the one who had his teeth in you at the time, but the other got away while I was trying to save you. Been trying to track him down, because averages don't have free range licenses and he was definitely out of bounds and feeding on an off limits human..." Billie shrugged. "So far, no luck, but I'll find him soon."

Trevor laughed. Off limits human. Yeah, he was supposed to be way off limits. By law vampires were restricted to certain territories, and only so many permitted per territory to keep a balance between predators and prey. Vampires were not allowed to kill. The moment they did they put themselves at risk to the vampire hunters.

Off limit humans included those considered 'valuable' to society, those too weak to endure having their blood drained, and anyone under eighteen. Broken vamps and a good number of average vamps ignored these and other laws, which meant hunters always had plenty to do - especially since broken and careless averages weren't careful about making new vampires.

Hunters were also technically off limits, though that rule perhaps only was stringently enforced at the lower levels. Trevor knew damned good and well top hunters blurred the lines a lot more than other hunters.

Also off limits, because vampires were nothing if not possessive and territorial, was anyone who worked for or otherwise 'belonged to' top vamps.

He laughed all the harder when Billie only frowned at him in concerned confusion.

"I'm not just off limits," he finally managed. "I work for Richard Freeman. I'm his housekeeper. I was taking a short vacation."

"A top?" Billie asked, brows shooting up. "Shit, I guess I'd better hurry up and find the poor bastard before your top does."

Personally, Trevor rather hoped Richard found him first. He turned his thoughts away from the assault before it got to him again. Seriously, he needed to stop wiggling out about it. He worked for a vampire, he'd had more than a few vigorous fantasies about being more than merely employed by a vampire...he needed to stop freaking out because he'd gotten a couple of nasty bites.

Which reminded him he really needed to call Richard. "Hey, can you get me over to that phone, or bring it here? I'm like nine hours late for work, Richard will fucking kill me himself if I don't contact him soon. I don't suppose my stuff made it off the beach?"

Billie's expression suddenly was entirely 'I've got to tell you something you don't want to know.'

Trevor groaned. "What's wrong?"

"You've been unconscious the better part of two days. That attack really did almost kill you. After you passed out, you slept the rest of the night and all of the following day. This is well into day two now."

"Shit!" Trevor said, throwing back the blankets. Richard would be livid. He was actually kinda surprised that someone hadn't tracked him down already. Possessive vampires didn't like when their stuff went missing.

"Whoa," Billie said, catching him when Trevor fell right back over again, stomach roiling with the dizziness that washed over him. "Sit down, I'll get the phone, but you're not going back to work quite yet. They bit you good and deep; it takes time to recover from a vampire attack like that. Fucking miracle you're not the slightest bit turned."

He crossed the room and grabbed the phone, setting it on the bed and sitting down on the one opposite. "Anyway, if you work for a top - why the fuck did those morons bite you? They weren't broken, they should have known better."

"I cut myself pretty bad several days ago," Trevor said as he punched in Richard's number. "Richard healed me and I think it accidentally erased the 'do not touch' sign."

"Ah," Billie said softly.

Trevor barely noticed, all of him riveted on the voice that answered the phone. Given the hour, he hadn't expected Richard himself to answer. Why was he up so early? Still, Trevor felt better just hearing him, especially since for all the coolness it was clearly relaxing at home Richard, not in the middle of a party Richard.

"Richard, it's Trevor. I'm sorry I'm really fucking late for work. I-"

"Late?" Richard asked, voice still level and cool, but a bit of confusion slipping into it. "Oh, yes. I see. You were supposed to be back...yesterday? The day before that? I hadn't noticed."

All the warm relief and happiness he'd felt turned cold as ice in his veins. Hadn't noticed? Richard...wasn't mad, didn't care...hadn't noticed he was missing? At all?

Ouch.

Trevor hadn't realized it was possible to hurt so goddamn much. He'd known he was just the housekeeper, but Richard always looked out for his own no matter what anyone said to the contrary.

Hadn't noticed. The words echoed over and over in his head, twisting deeper and harder with every repetition.

All his work. The years of service. Watching and wishing quietly, without bothering anyone, always doing what was asked... What about the recent hours playing games? The way Richard had healed him?

Not a bit of that had been missed? Did he really mean so fucking little?

He didn't deserve that. In fact, he deserved a hell of a lot fucking more. Goddamn it, he deserved to be fucking missed.

Hurt turned to anger, the ice in his veins turned boiling hot. "Then I guess now's a good time to announce I fucking quit!" He slammed the phone down in the cradle before Richard could get a word in edgewise, then picked up the phone and threw it back across the room.

See if Richard managed not to notice that.

"Uh...I'm going to guess that's not the way that was supposed to go."

Trevor said nothing, wishing he had something else to throw.

"I'm guessing you just broke up or something?"

Trevor laughed - laughed and laughed and laughed, and tried not to notice it sounded way too close to sobbing or something equally stupid and girly. "Apparently, there was nothing to break up. He didn't even notice I was missing." He shook his head, and spoke before Billie could say anything further. "I think I need a shower."

Billie frowned, but clearly knew better than to argue. "Just go slow, man. Cracking your head on something when you fall over isn't going to help anything."

"Yeah, what a fucking pity a concussion would be," Trevor said bitterly, slowly making his way to the bathroom, wondering miserably what in the hell he was going to do now.

\*~\*~\*

Eight days later he was still mired in misery, with a heavy suspicion he would be mired for a very long fucking time to come.

But he was comfortably mired in misery, at least. A lakeside resort had nothing on a beachside resort, but beaches made him think too much of home.

Of not being missed. Shit, he'd been so confident - cocky - about telling those vampires they shouldn't mess with him because he worked for Richard. Probably Richard would have told them to enjoy themselves.

He slammed his book shut and threw it across the room, then picked up his beer and drained the glass.

Damn it. Richard hadn't noticed. Could not have cared less. That was that. Over. Done. He wasn't doing himself any favors by brooding on it. The best thing he could do now was move forward, find something else to do.

Though, really, he didn't have to do anything. Playing housekeeper to a top vamp paid extremely well. He could play for years and not have a single thing to worry about.

He'd rather be washing dishes while surreptitiously watching Richard wake up.

Heaving a sigh, disgusted with himself, Trevor stood up and retrieved his book. Setting it on the table, he slipped on his sandals, made certain he looked moderately respectable, then ventured downstairs to the hotel's bar and ordered another beer.

This one he nursed slowly, though the temptation to drink the third as quickly as he'd drunk the first two was strong. People came and went around him, and he thought a couple had tried to talk to him, but he simply could not bring himself to give a fuck.

Halfway through his fourth beer, he abruptly decided he'd had enough of trying to play normal. He didn't fucking know how, and he didn't want to. Vampires had always been his thing, and he'd liked running Richard's home - even those stupid fucking parties.

Sighing, he finished the beer in one long swallow, then fumbled for his wallet to pay the tab. Briefly he recalled he could just add it to his room bill, but the thought slipped away in an alcohol-induced buzz before it could solidify.

Then a hand covered his, stilling his movements, and another settled on his back.

"I'll take care of it."

Oh.

What the hell?

Trevor stood in stunned silence, struggling to both breathe and think, as Richard paid his tab.

Then he remembered he was hurt and pissed, and the reason why.

Jerking away, stumbling back, he summoned every last bit of pain and anger he'd been nursing for over a week. "What are you doing here?" He snapped.

Richard said nothing, merely murmured a polite thanks to the bartender, left a tip, and then grabbed Trevor's arm and hauled him out of the bar.

Trevor struggled to get away, struggled not to notice Richard.

Oh, gods did he look good. As upset as he was, as much as he wanted to hate Richard, he still looked so fucking good. A sight for sore eyes if ever there was one, even if he shouldn't be, even if Trevor didn't want him to be.

He wasn't all fancied up, that's what really did it. Every time Richard left his home, he was dressed to the nines. Now...he was wearing khakis and a simple polo, the Richard equivalent of faded jeans and an old t-shirt. His hair was mussed, like he hadn't bothered to do more than run a comb over it.

Trevor wanted to jump him, and that just pissed him off more. He attempted to pull away as he was half-led, half-dragged from the bar. Richard didn't give. "Let me go."

"We need to talk," Richard said quietly, pressing the button for the elevator as they reached the lobby.

"Why?" Trevor asked bitterly. "I can't think you'd give a fuck one way or the other about your ex-housekeeper."

The elevator chimed, and he was yanked inside - and right up against Richard, who seemed perfectly content to hold him in a fashion in which one did not normally hold his housekeeper. Especially an unmissed housekeeper.

"So what are we talking about?" he asked, attempting to put some space between them and failing miserably.

Richard's arm around his waist was warm, steadying, and Trevor wanted to stay fucking furious and it hurt to be this close when he knew Richard didn't care and couldn't he just go away so Trevor could try to get over him once and for all?



"Pride goeth before the fall," Richard said quietly, "or so I believe that saying always went."

"What?" Trevor asked.

Richard shook his head, and pushed gently as the elevator doors slid open, and Trevor was entirely unsurprised to learn that Richard knew his room number.

Inside, Richard still would not let him go and Trevor really wished he would.

"So talk," he said.

Instead of speaking, Richard jerked him close - and kissed him.

Trevor's eyes widened, because there was no mistaking that, but he couldn't fucking make sense of it either.

He tried to resist, but it was a token resistance at best. Obviously he'd had more beer than he remembered, if he actually thought this was happening. Goddamn, why couldn't reality actually be this good? Richard tasted sharp and slightly sweet, a surprise because he never thought sweet a possibility. He kissed with all the skill and confidence he showed everything... but with a warmth that made Trevor think of him in full on sleepy mode.

It wasn't until they broke apart and he opened his eyes to meet Richard's that he realized he wasn't lost to some drunken fantasy.

"What's going on? Why did you kiss me?"

"Because maybe I should have long ago," Richard said quietly.

Trevor attempted to respond to that, but before he could figure out what to say Richard sank fingers into his hair and tilted his head back and to the side. Then he made a sound that was one hundred percent pissed off possessive vampire.

"You were bitten," Richard snarled. "I thought that hunter said it just to piss me off. Who dared bite you?"

"What do you care?" Trevor asked, so tired of being yanked back and forth between emotions. "You didn't even notice I was gone, why would you care I was bitten?"

Richard sighed softly, though his grip in Trevor's hair did not ease. "I'm a liar, and far too good of one, if this mess is anything by which to judge." He trailed his fingers lightly across the scars upon Trevor's throat.

Trevor closed his eyes, unable to take it all - Richard kissing him, touching him, getting snarly possessive over him. "Liar?" he finally managed.

"You have never taken off for so long," Richard said slowly. "No...perhaps that is the wrong place to start. I wanted Preston, he rejected my advances. I was upset...but more upset that I was not as upset as I thought I should have been."

That took a minute to work through. Slowly Trevor opened his eyes again. "So...you weren't as upset at getting turned down flat as you thought you would be?"

"Precisely," Richard replied. "Still, it was hard to take, and I did not take it well. Your games drew me out of my sulking, albeit reluctantly at first."

Trevor waited.

Slowly Richard eased his grip on Trevor's hair, combing through it lightly, stroking across the back of his neck and Trevor could not have stopped himself from shivering any more than he could have stopped himself from breathing.

"Healing you, that last night, did not leave me wholly unaffected," Richard continued, still speaking slowly, as though working through every word. Strange from a man who usually spoke quickly and confidently. "I thought it meant I was over my sulking..."

Yeah, he remembered that night. He hated listening to Richard and his fucking toys.

"Then you took off for a week, and I lost all interest in doing anything. I could not understand why...then you did not return when you were supposed to...and then another day passed...and I was at last forced to admit that what I wanted was my housekeeper, and he was nowhere to be found. I finally gave in to weakness and called your cell, but you never answered. Then I began to grow worried, then angry - then you called, and I'm afraid my pride went up. I did not want to admit I had

been sitting in my house sulking and waiting for you to return."

Trevor stared. "You did notice?" he asked, and he didn't care how he sounded, because goddamn it that had really hurt. He didn't think he'd ever forget how much that hurt.

"I would say the real question," Richard said softly, "is why did I not notice sooner? Truly pathetic is a vampire of my age not realizing until his housekeeper quit just what he could have had." He rubbed a thumb over Trevor's lips. "How long?"

"A long time," Trevor said.

"Hmm," Richard said, and bent to kiss him again, slow and thorough, the sort of kiss that left a deep ache. "Do I stand a chance of convincing you to come back?"

Trevor's laugh was a bit wobbly with disbelief and no small measure of happiness. "I'd say you're doing a good job so far, but I still find it hard to believe you'd want me when you never cared before."

"Is there not an old saying, tired but still true, that says you do not know what you have until it's gone?"

"Something like that," Trevor said. He frowned, hesitating despite himself. "So are you just here to get your housekeeper back?"

Richard gave an inelegant snort. "I admit everything has gone quite wrong without you to run it, but I will find another housekeeper if you would prefer to be relieved of those duties - because if you come back, it will be as mine."

Trevor shivered again, eyes sliding closed against the possessive growl that slipped into Richard's voice. He had to be dreaming.

The fingers stroking over his bite scars made him startle.

"This is my fault," Richard said softly. "I undid my mark when I healed you. I should have realized it."

"S"okay," Trevor said, drawing a shaky breath. "Accidents happen."

"Not this kind," Richard snarled. "Certainly it will not happen again."

That was all the warning Trevor got before he was bitten - hard and sharp and it hurt, but Richard's arms were sure and warm around him, reassuring rather than painful. The bite was over nearly as soon as it had begun.

Richard lapped at the wound, healing it, then the lapping gradually became light, quick kisses trailing a slow path back to his mouth, which Richard took thoroughly when he finally reached it.

Trevor moaned and held on for dear life.

"You taste much better when you are not trying to taste unpleasant, though a good red wine will suit you far better than the beer," Richard said when he finally broke the kiss, a faint smile curving his mouth. "So will you come home?"

"Yeah," Trevor said, resting his head against Richard's chest.

Richard held him tight, nipping lightly at the lingering marks from his own bite. "Good, because to add insult to injury I still cannot kill Dracula."

## Midsummer's Moon

### Part One: Waxing Moon

Lowell sighed as yet another car passed him by, and made a note to hate the driver and passengers the rest of his life. 'Body Found By Highway: No One Would Give Poor Werewolf A Ride in the Rain.'

The cold rain that was probably going to give him hypothermia or the flu or whatever. Maybe that was for the best, really. 'Werewolf Finally Dies: World Sleeps Better.'

Shaking his head at himself, Lowell waited until the car was well out of sight and truly had no intention of maybe turning around to help the poor bastard drowning slowly to death after all.

Damn it, he just wanted not to be wet anymore. He'd been needing a shower, but this was so not what he'd had in mind. Now if the rain was near-boiling and had come with soap...

Ugh, he must be tired if he was thinking such stupid thoughts.

At least it was a light, if steady, downpour. Unfortunately, the sun had decided to continue obeying the laws of nature. Or space. Physics? Whatever. It had decided to set, rather than help him by not setting, and his chances of hitching a ride diminished by the minute. When it was finally well and truly dark, he could kiss any hope of one goodbye. Dark automatically made him evil and scary, even if he was nothing more than some sort of sad, drowning puppy.

Werewolf. Drowning Puppy. Haha. 'Werewolf Kills Self To Spare World Bad Humor.'

He probably should have tried to sneak a sleep at the last gas station, but the clerk had creeped him out in no small way. Being a werewolf wasn't good for much, but it helped loads with the self-preservation thing.

At least the last sign had said Midsummer's Night was only twenty miles away.

Twenty miles and he could, at the very least, spend an hour or few in a waiting room. Like as not Dr. Kuhl would want nothing to do with him, and have security or something escort him out - that'd happened enough times in his life for him to know when it could happen - but at least for a bit he'd be warm and dry. Maybe there'd be time to read a few magazines, have a nap...

He really had come far in life, Lowell thought miserably, when the highlight of his day was killing time in some doctor's waiting room. Pathetic. He slid a hand into his pocket and touched the ziplock within it, filched from a shelter kitchen to protect his precious slip of paper from the elements.

Nothing but a name, an address, and the directions he'd gotten off a library computer. Not much at all, but it was a goal - a sliver of hope.

Hope that maybe, just maybe, he'd be able to become normal. Get rid of the damned curse which had ruined any chance he had of a life. To be human, rather than some horrid monster no one could stand.

Of course, he wasn't stupid enough to get his hopes too high - it did seem kinda farfetched that anyone could actually make a cure for werewolf. He thought there was a fancier term for it. Ly-something.

Though at the rate he was going, it might not matter. He sneezed hard, shuddering in the rain, his clothes totally not up for the inclement weather. He'd had a raincoat once, an ugly red thing with an even uglier plaid lining, but it had been warm and dry. That's what he got for falling asleep at a bus station. He should have worked harder at staying awake. Served him right.

Drat it. Not so much as a single car. Even for an old highway this was a bit ridiculous.

Not that it really mattered. Raining and getting darker by the second - he should stop looking for a ride and look for a place he could sleep without getting run over or picked up by cops or mugged or something.

For better or worse, he was still two weeks from changing. Just as well, in the end, because he might have been tempted to travel as a wolf and he resisted such temptations whenever possible. The last time that had happened... Lowell shuddered and turned his thoughts elsewhere.

No, wolf form meant finding a place to hide until the hell was over.

Instead of bad memories, he turned to his most-hated, favorite game of 'what if'.

What if this Dr. Kuhl really had found a cure for ly...ly...werewolf-ness? What if he was good enough to give it to Lowell? Would he expect cash? The thought soured Lowell's stomach, because what little money he did have he'd refused to spend on the hope a meager two hundred dollars would be enough to pay for the cure, and he had the sinking feeling it wouldn't be nearly enough.

Maybe, however, Dr. Kuhl would let him work to cover the rest of it. He could certainly think of worse arrangements. Just stupid grunt work, but it wasn't like he could do anything else.

Then...then he'd finally have the cure, and would be normal and people wouldn't freak out and shun him or try to turn him

over to animal control or the cops. They wouldn't try to shoot him or toss silver at him...and...

And it was all stupid daydreaming, because even assuming for one minute there was a cure and the doctor would give it to a nobody werewolf like him, he still would have a long way to go before he was anything but a homeless, worthless nobody.

Still, life would be a lot easier when he wasn't part wolf.

It would.

Determination renewed, he trudged on through the rain, glaring at the now nearly-set sun. It wasn't like it was the first time he'd had to trudge about everywhere in the dark. He'd live. Probably.

He sneezed again, steps faltering, sneaker catching on some stray bit of rubble and Lowell went tumbling, landing hard on the roadside. Damn it. 'Werewolf Killed By Own Clumsiness.'

Rolling his eyes, Lowell started to get up again - then just fell back down, suddenly too tired to move. His motivation of only seconds before had gone out like a light. What was he thinking, seriously? He was wearing jeans that had more holes than he could count, socks that were only clean because he'd collected enough change to do some laundry. The expense had made him cringe, but he definitely wasn't going to get a cure if he smelled like a garbage pit...an old corduroy jacket that should have been retired long ago...and hair so scraggly it was probably hard to tell he did, in fact, spend most of his time in a human-shaped form.

Homeless and pathetic, that's all he was, and one glance was all it took for anyone to figure it out. No way was some semi-famous doctor going to waste his time on a vagabond werewolf when he could sell the cure for thousands or even more to wealthy werewolves.

If there was such a thing, Lowell supposed. Probably there was. Surely not all werewolves were like him...but he'd only ever met a handful of others, and none of them had been much better off than he. There didn't seem to be many of them, but there must be if werewolves kept popping up, if a doctor would go to the trouble of creating a cure.

Right?

So, likely Dr. Kuhl would just call security and that would be that.

Which meant, nice waiting room aside, he was wasting his time. Stupid, stupid, stupid. He should take his pathetic two hundred dollars and find a room and food and then in the morning he could scrounge up some work to do to make more money.

...and pretend to be normal until the full moon struck and he turned into a wolf and either was accidentally seen or missed work and was fired, or something more disastrous (which had never happened to him, but he'd heard stories from the few other wolves, and didn't want a story of his own to tell).

Sighing, Lowell tried to make himself stand, because doing something was better than nothing - but for more years than he could remember he'd been trying one thing or another and all it had gotten him was an address and an empty road while the rain slowly pneumonia-ed him to death.

His head jerked up at the sound of a car, and he reflexively held out a thumb - wholly unsurprised when it kept right on going, paying him no mind.

Jerks. Couldn't they see he was too wet and cold and miserable to be a crazy ax murderer? His poor little backpack, filched from a dumpster, couldn't even hold an axe. It barely held his spare clothes as it was.

Lowell yawned, and gave serious consideration to the idea of falling over and going to sleep right in the puddle he was occupying.

Another car approached, but he didn't bother to try and flag it down, simply waited for it to zoom on past.

Except...he must be going crazy, cause it sure as hell sounded like it was slowing down...

Looking up, he saw that either he was sick enough the hallucinations had started - or the car really had stopped.

Then a man got out, bearing an umbrella, and jogged toward him.

"Are you okay?" the man asked. Lowell couldn't really see him much, not with the rain and dark and only the car for light... but his voice was pleasant. He knew real kindness when he heard it, and despite the sneezing his sense of smell wasn't

totally gone.

What little he could smell actually smelled...yummy. Bad dog. No weird thoughts. Humans did not smell yummy, except to big bad wolfs and he wasn't one of those, no.

"Um..." Lowell tried to think of something to say, but obviously his brain was waterlogged. 'Mute Werewolf Left to Die.' Yeah, that'd be fitting.

But his possible rescuer didn't seem fazed at all, merely smiled and reached out to grasp Lowell's arm, tugging him up and close enough to stand beneath the large umbrella. "Come on, my friend, you can't stay out here - you'll catch your death, if you haven't already."

Lowell started to speak, then realized he'd probably only say 'um' again, and snapped his mouth shut.

Too tired to worry if Mr. Nice Guy might be the axe murderer, he allowed himself to be dragged toward and pushed down into the car.

Oh, heat. He was making a mess of the car and felt really bad about that, but the heat was turned on and rain wasn't falling on his head anymore and he didn't have to keep walking for at least a little bit...

It was almost enough to make him cry.

The driver door opened, his rescuer sliding into the seat, and Lowell dared to take a wary peek, never certain what to say or do in these rare moments where someone was nice to him.

Damn.

Was it a blessing or a curse that his rescuer was insanely hot? Not like, typical hot, but...something out of an old book or movie hot. Khakis, oxford, a long trench coat he hadn't bothered to fasten up... Slender, but not boney, dark hair and pretty blue eyes behind old-fashioned looking spectacles. Pretty.

"You look as though you've endured more than your fair share of the rain," the man said with a gentle laugh, fingers moving absently over the dash as he cranked the heat up, adjusted the vents. "We should be home shortly, you can shower and dry off and all there; I should even have some clothes lying about the place."

Lowell blinked. Come again? "Um - you don't - that is - I don't want to be a bother. Um. Thanks for the lift, it's really appreciated." He sneezed hard, and was almost grateful for it cutting off the rest of the stupidity that would have fallen out of his dumb mouth.

The man laughed. "Not a bother. You're welcome. I insist you come to my house. I promise I won't kill you or anything. Where are you headed?"

"Um." Lowell wanted to smack his head against the window. Think, stupid. Speak. Good dog. "I'm trying to get to Midsummer's Night."

"I see," the man said softly, and Lowell wondered why the happy tone of his voice had suddenly shifted. His smell had altered too, and he'd better stop thinking about smell because now that they were out of the rain he was forced to conclude that the stranger really and truly did smell yummy.

He couldn't quite define what yummy meant, but he knew that was definitely the way to describe it.

Damn it.

He licked his lips, and started speaking again just to drown his own dumb thoughts. "I'm, uh, looking for a guy...um, a doctor actually."

"Yeah, I rather imagined you were," the man replied sadly. He extended his hand, smiling in a way that was far from happy. "Doctor Peter Kuhl, at your service."

Lowell felt the hope he'd been trying not to have wither and die in his chest, leaving a terrible ache. "You are?" At Dr. Kuhl's nod, his shoulders drooped. "You don't have a cure."

"No," Dr. Kuhl said softly. "I do not. I'm afraid it's a rumor I've been trying to kill for a very long time." The hand Lowell hadn't shaken landed gently on his shoulder. "But, come home with me. I promise my house is always welcome to any werewolf in need of one. Get clean, warm, fed, and rested. We'll figure out the rest in the morning, okay? What's your

name?"

He tried to argue, to make himself get out of the car or something, because what was the point if there was no cure?

But beggars could not be choosers, and he was definitely a beggar, and even if this guy was a lying axe murderer or simply an honest, simple doctor with no cure for werewolves - and he'd known Lowell was a werewolf, obviously, and that said a lot - that was still probably the best offer Lowell had ever heard. In his entire life.

"Okay," he said. Then he tried to remember his manners. "Thank you, Dr. Kuhl. Oh, um. My name is Lowell."

"You should not be thanking me for anything," Dr. Kuhl replied. "Please, call me Peter. It's about thirty minutes to my house yet, so go ahead and relax a bit."

Lowell nodded, having no intention of doing any such thing, but exhaustion and hunger and disappointment and the warm car all conspired against him, overriding even his wet, freezing clothes, and before he'd fully realized it he was falling asleep.

His shoulder was shaken gently some time later, and Lowell blinked sleepily at whoever was doing the shaking, a shout not to steal his stuff on the tip of his tongue - then he saw pretty blue eyes behind spectacles and everything came back. "Oh! Sorry!"

Peter laughed. "No worries, come on inside."

Stumbling a bit while he fought against sleep, Lowell followed him up a gravel driveway to a side door that led into a cozy little kitchen. Blue and green, little splashes of yellow here and there, a sturdy little corner table with benches and stuff at one end, an island in the middle.

Nice. He'd had a brief stint as an assistant in a diner kitchen, once. Mostly his job had been dishwashing and trash duty and stuff, but the cook had taught him a few things and he'd had a lot of fun actually making food and seeing how certain things were made...and eating all the leftovers, of course.

He so wished he knew what to do with a kitchen like this, 'cause it looked like knowing would be a lot of fun.

Ah, well. It wasn't like he was going to be here long. He was pathetic enough to take what was offered and stay the night, but he'd sneak off before morning. No one liked losers hanging around.

"This way," Peter said, and Lowell rather thought he should be too tired to notice Peter had a pretty smile...but then again, he saw very little pretty in his life, and even less of it smiled at him.

Slowly he followed Peter into what proved to be the laundry room.

"Here," Peter said, taking a folded towel from where it sat with other stuff on top of the dryer. He pointed past Lowell's shoulder, to where he saw another door. "Bathroom is right through there, just to the right. You can leave all your stuff here, we'll get it washed. I'll scrounge up some extra clothes while you get warm and clean, then throw some sort of dinner together."

He departed before Lowell could get a word in edgewise. Lowell stood for a moment, staring and blinking. Then he finally shrugged and did as he was told. Far be it for him to argue, though it would suck later to put on his dirty clothes. Oh, well. Nothing for it.

Stripping out of said dirty clothes, he left them in a heap in front of the washing machine, then clutched the towel close and went where he was directed, more than a little disconcerted to be walking about a stranger's house butt naked - but the bathroom was almost immediately off the laundry room.

He caught a glimpse of stairs, and what looked like a living room, then he closed the bathroom door behind him and made a beeline for the shower. When it was hot enough to all but melt off his skin, he hopped in and just stood.

Oh, a guilty pleasure this, and he shouldn't just use someone else's hot water like this, but everyone else got to have hot water every day and his last hot shower he could barely remember and Peter had told him to take a shower... 'Werewolf Drowns in Water and Own Thoughts.'

Shaking his head at himself, Lowell snagged the soap and began to scrub and scrub, washing himself until his skin was raw and not much of the soap remained. He'd leave money to pay for it.

Scrubbed clean, he tackled his hair next, washing and rewashing until he almost thought it didn't look like a rat nest.



At last he gave in and after one last, glorious minute of standing in the hot water, he turned it off and climbed out - and jumped.

Clothes were waiting for him on the counter. Like, they looked brand new and everything. Even the boxers still had tags on them.

What really bothered him, however, was that he hadn't heard Peter come in. He hadn't been that enamored of the soap. Almost, but not quite. That wasn't like him; the fact that he always paid such careful attention to his surroundings was the reason he was a miserable werewolf rather than a dead one.

So why hadn't he heard Peter come in?

He shrugged the question off for the time being, and considered the clothes instead. Brand new, he felt more than a little guilty...but he'd take them off again before he left, so all was good. Tearing the tags off, he quickly pulled on the blue boxers, jeans, white t-shirt, dark green sweater, and lastly a pair of thick, soft, white socks.

Finally he dragged his eyes up the mirror - and was not as horrified by what he saw as he had been expecting. He'd always tried to care of himself as best he could, cadging and filching and stealing what he could on the chance that someday he might have to look healthy and presentable.

Cleaned up, with his blonde hair showing and the grime scrubbed away enough you could see his green eyes...he was no one's idea of a prize, especially since he was mostly bone, but...he wouldn't make little children cry either.

Taking a deep breath, he threw his towel in a hamper near the toilet, then finally let himself out of the bathroom and found his way quickly back to the kitchen.

His stomach growled as the smell of something that contained veggies and steak and potatoes hit his nostrils. He wanted to actually growl, which was sort of freaky, 'cause normally he did that shit only a lot closer to the full moon.

"Warm and refreshed?" Peter asked, giving him another pretty smile.

Lowell nodded, hastily looking away, eyes landing instead on the table and the wonderful smelling food on it. Some sort of casserole thingie, with all the yummy stuff layered just so, mashed potatoes on top.

Peter laughed softly, and Lowell jerked his gaze up, feeling his cheeks heat. "Sit down, eat. Lord knows I would never have been able to eat this much by myself. Women around here seem to think I'm perpetually starving."

Not quite certain what to say to that, Lowell slowly slid into one of the seats and...sat and waited. He totally had no clue about uh, manners and stuff. 'Werewolf Eats More Like Werpig, Says Horrified Local Doctor.'

Then Peter sat down, and almost before he could blink Lowell found himself staring at a heaping plate of food. It was probably the second-best thing he'd ever smelled in all his life...and he would figure out why it took second place to Peter and his weird yummy smell later.

Picking up his fork, Lowell began decimating the contents of his plate. It was briefly empty, then suddenly filled again, and he could not find it in him to protest. He wouldn't be able to eat like this again for a very long time.

When he finally finished, and bothered to look up, he realized that Peter was watching him with a smile curving his face.

Flushing, Lowell dropped his fork and ducked his head. "Sorry," he muttered. "Guess I was hungrier than I thought...I, uh, didn't mean to-"

"It's all right," Peter said, reaching out and lightly patting his hand. "All this is the very least I can do, the very least I owe you, after you worked so hard to come here for something that proved false."

Oh, yeah. Suddenly the reason he would be sneaking out later came crashing back down, and Lowell struggled not to let it get to him because he'd known it likely wasn't true but still who wanted to spend his whole life a freak?

Peter's hand was on his again, squeezing it tight. "I'm sorry," Peter said slowly. "I tried for years to develop a cure, truly I did, but I've never been able to make it work. I gave up for good two years ago. A brighter mind than mine will figure it out someday, perhaps."

Lowell nodded, trying to accept, cause he'd known all along in his heart of hearts...but..."Stacey just sounded so...so..."

"Convincing?" Peter finished, voice going hard and flat. "Yes, I'm sure he did. Stacey was very good at sounding convincing."

Startled, Lowell looked up, only to be completely thrown by the anger and pain that were etched deep into Peter's face, sunk into his eyes. "Um..." He licked his lips, feeling nervous, hating that Peter seemed so miserable suddenly. "You knew Stacey?"

Peter nodded, voice still so flat and cold when he answered. "Yes, I knew Stacey." He started to say more when the back door abruptly flew open.

Lowell stared, nostrils flaring at the smell of blood that washed over him. Yet he could not associate it with the woman who stood in the doorway, though she was unmistakably the source.

She was...colorful. Jangly. Her skirt was made of all kinds of blocks of different colors and patterns, like she'd made it from a quilt or something. She wore a bright red tanktop, and jangled because of the profusions of beads and bells and other random bits and charms at her neck, wrists, and waist. Her blonde hair was just as crazy as the rest, curly here, braided there, most of it held up off her neck by a pair of red chopsticks. Pretty, but sort of overwhelming, and the color and beads and all were completely at odds with what he knew her smell to be.

"Vampire," he said in disbelief as she drew close enough there could be no mistaking the scent.

Peter groaned. "Bloodsucker, go away. Learn to knock."

The woman sniffed, planting a hand on her hips, a measuring cup clasped idly in the other. "If I knocked, you wouldn't let me in. Easier to skip that part."

"Go away, Sally," Peter repeated, glaring.

Instead, Sally just ignored him and strode to the counter near the stove, pulling forward a blue porcelain container, pouring out some of the contents into her measuring cup. "So who's the cutie?" she asked as she returned the container and wandered to the table.

Lowell just stared. He'd seen vampires before; they were usually kinda scary though they'd never actually bothered him. Always in the cities, though, he'd never seen them in the small towns. Not that he'd been in many small towns himself, but still.

"You're scaring him," Peter said sharply. "You scare everybody."

"Not you," Sally said, rolling her eyes. "I'm not scaring him. He's--"

"Probably not even eighteen," Peter said sharply. "I found him walking along the highway, and he was on his way to see me."

Sally blinked. "Oh. I see." She moved around the table and plopped down next to Lowell, slinging an arm over his shoulder. "You're a handsome one, no mistake. If I ever divorce my idiot husband, you and me can run away together."

Peter groaned. "I'm so about to go fetch your husband."

"Don't you dare, he's still recovering from your nasty little stunt with the flares."

"You started it this time, bloodsucker," Peter retorted. "Next time tell him not to get in the line of fire."

Sally sniffed. "Whatever, Mad Scientist."

Lowell wondered if it were possible to discreetly slip under the table and then sneak away.

"You get used to her after awhile," Peter said, smiling briefly at him before shooting another glare at Sally.

"He's a cutie, really. Gonna keep him around?"

They exchanged a look, and Lowell knew undercurrents when he felt them. What was going on? Should he bolt? The arm around his shoulders was starting to freak him out. People didn't touch him. Ever. Unless they were cops or something and those guys were never nice except for like one who'd given him a cup of coffee and kept looking vaguely guilty.

"Let him go, Sally."

Instead of arguing, as Lowell had half expected, Sally promptly let him go and stood up, wandering to the fridge and pulling out a carton of eggs. She selected two and put them carefully on top of her sugar.

"I am not your grocery store, you damn bloodsucker," Peter said, standing up in exasperation and taking away the butter she'd just stolen.

Sally snatched it back, set it with her sugar, then vanished into the pantry. "Yes, you are. Especially when I'm making cookies. Don't you have any cocoa?"

"Third shelf, toward the back," Peter said, rolling his eyes at Lowell before striding over to the coffee maker tucked away in the corner of the counter near the sink. "Do you like coffee, Lowell?"

"Uh, yes," Lowell said. He loved coffee, not least of all because people would most often give him that for free. Coffee, (powdered) cream, and sugar tended to be his most common food groups.

Sally returned from the pantry, arms loaded down with various things - cocoa, chocolate chips, nuts... She smiled at him, setting everything on the table. "Do you like cookies, Lowell? I'm making double chocolate, classic chocolate chip, sugar cookies, and probably peanut butter or my husband will whine like a five year old."

Lowell tried not to stare, but he suspected he was failing. "Uh...you are a vampire, right?"

"Yes," Sally said, laughing. "The cookies are for the school fair tomorrow. I always help stock the snack bar. Plenty left over for my darling neighbor, however, even if he should still be in trouble for the flare stunt."

Peter snorted. "You started it, bloodsucker, and given you just emptied my pantry to make the cookies - you can share the goods."

Sally rolled her eyes at Lowell, then winked at him. "Have you got a basket? I forgot to bring one, and I can't carry all this back by myself."

"You!" Peter said, heaving a long sigh before stomping off into the laundry room. He came back with a basket that looked like an Easter Bunny reject and knocked Sally lightly upside the head with it.

"Thank you, darling grocery boy."

"Bloodsucker!"

"Mad Scientist!" Packing everything neatly into the basket, she wiggled her finger at Lowell and departed as suddenly as she had come.

Peter rolled his eyes again as he returned with two cups of coffee, departing briefly to fetch a sugar bowl and a carton of half & half from the fridge. "You get used to her after a bit. Vampires think they can muck with everyone and everything. Need to be kept in line." He grinned as he sat down, pushing his glasses back up his nose.

Was it okay to find his rescuer attractive? That was probably against the rules, or at the least very stupid - but ignoring shit like that was what had kept him alive. Despite everything, Peter smelled good and looked good and that definitely meant Lowell needed to go the very minute the getting was good.

He fixed his coffee and sipped it slowly, and wished he could freeze time right like this, where everything was perfect and nothing was going to ever go wrong. "Um. Thank you for, uh, all of this. I'm sorry to be such a problem."

Peter looked at him, smiling softly. "You're not a problem. I live here all alone; it's always nice to have someone else about. Besides, it's mostly my fault you're here at all. You're welcome to stay as long as you like. Was there anywhere else you needed to be?"

"No," Lowell said, almost laughing. Where would he have to go?

"If you don't mind my asking," Peter said slowly, setting his coffee down. "How old are you?"

Lowell shrugged, and looked down at his own coffee, humiliation making his cheeks hot. "I don't know." How could he? Vaguely he remembered an orphanage or something, but one too many fights with some of the others...

After that, it seemed there was always a reason no one wanted him around - even other supernaturals. The few wolves he'd encountered hadn't wanted company, which he'd never gotten, cause it'd be nice not to be the only wolf...

"That's what I thought," Peter said thoughtfully, idly tracing the rim of his cup. "If I had to guess, I would say you are right around eighteen, give or take a few months..." He smiled faintly. "Not that it really matters, forgive a scientist his curiosity."

Lowell shrugged, confused but beyond caring. It didn't matter to him how old he was, if it interested someone else, fine.

Peter laughed softly and stood to fetch the coffee pot, refilling Lowell's mug. "I'm glad you appear to have escaped being sick. I've learned the hard way that werewolves make lousy patients." He winked.

"Being sick sucks," Lowell said, because it did. He hated being sick. It just made the wolf stuff harder to control and contain, and he pretty much wanted to bite every stupid person that crossed his path.

He didn't know much about being a werewolf, but he'd learned pretty young not to bite people. Not that he usually wanted to, people never smelled like something he'd want to sink his teeth into.

Sometimes he wondered who had bitten him. The other werewolves he'd met knew who had bitten them, and why. Lowell couldn't remember; he must have been really tiny when he'd been bitten. There wasn't even a scar. He wondered what sort of jerk inflicted ly-whatever on a poor, dumb kid.

"You look ready to fall over," Peter said, breaking into his thoughts.

Lowell shrugged. He was tired, but really it seemed like he was always tired.

"Come on, you can catch some z's. I keep weird hours, I warn you now. All of Midsummer keeps weird hours, minus a small handful." Peter smiled. "It's a supernatural kind of town, really. Even the humans here have some sort of connection to supernaturals."

"Um..." Lowell had never heard of such a thing. He rarely ever saw supernaturals. Sometimes he swore the ones he did see tried to avoid him, except that was dumb - well, unless they were avoiding the werewolf hobo, which made sense, but sometimes he got good work and managed to be respectable for a bit and even then none of them hung about him for long. "That's weird."

"It's certainly not common, but I promise you won't be treated here the same as you've probably been treated everywhere else. Especially if you've got Sally's approval, which I think you do. No one is going to cross a top vamp, even if most other vampires consider her an embarrassment to their name."

Lowell almost smiled, but felt bad doing so. "I've never seen another vampire like her, though I haven't seen many. What's a...top vamp?"

Peter looked at him in surprise. "Do you not know anything about vampires? What do you know about werewolves?"

"Umm...vampires are scary, especially the ones that smell like there's something wrong with their blood. I met two others that smell like Sally, though I only saw them from far away."

"Top vampires," Peter said. "They've been around usually for centuries. I think Sally staked a claim here back when it was just a handful of shacks and a village well. Her husband - just one of her eccentricities - is human. Jordan, he's a nice guy, with the patience of a saint if he's married to her." He winked again, then turned more serious. "So you really don't know much about werewolves?"

Lowell shrugged. "Not really. Biting spreads it. I've never run across many others, and they never wanted to stick around. I don't remember who bit me or why."

"Bit you?" Peter repeated softly. "I see."

"See what?" Lowell asked.

"Mm, you really do look tired," Peter said. "I shouldn't keep rambling on. Come on, I'll show you to your bed, and get you settled, and we can talk more over breakfast."

Lowell frowned. But he'd been about to talk about werewolves...why would he stop? That wasn't fair. How did a human doctor know more about werewolves than him? He probably even knew that stupid Ly-word Lowell could never remember. "But-how do you know so much about werewolves? Were you really working on a cure? What..." What was going on, and why did he feel like he was missing something?

Peter reached out to lightly hold his hand again. "I promise I will explain what I know, and why, in due time. But right now you're tired and upset, and being inundated with information would not help you at all. I should never have started asking

questions; my curiosity gets me in a lot of trouble. Come, let's get you to bed."

He tried to muster a protest, but even with the coffee in his system Lowell was suddenly succumbing to the exhaustion he'd been fighting since Peter had woken him up in the car. Shelving the protests for later, he went obediently as Peter guided him out of the kitchen, up the stairs, and into a room that smelled like it hadn't been used for a bit. All the people smells were old, faded, and the sheets as he fell down on them smelled like nothing more than detergent.

It occurred to him belatedly, as he grew too heavy and sleepy to move, that if he wanted answers then he couldn't sneak away...but could he stay? Why would Peter want him to stay?

Then sleep took him, and the questions left him in peace for a time.

\*~\*~\*

Lowell didn't know what to do with himself.

After eating breakfast, Peter had told him to 'explore and have fun' before vanishing through a door beneath the stairs. Lowell wondered what was down there, because it was obviously a lot more than a closet unless Peter was particularly strange.

Explore and have fun?

He got the explore part well enough, but how exactly was he supposed to go about having fun? What was fun? He didn't have a whole lot of 'fun' memories stored for reference. In his experience, fun usually required money and even though he now had two hundred dollars to play with...he had no idea what to buy with it.

Well, new soap and detergent and all kinds of things he should replace for Peter since he was using them.

Exploring the house didn't take long. It was a pretty big house, but half the downstairs was given over to a little clinic thing packed with all kinds of weird stuff that he was pretty sure, though not positive, were normally in a doctor's office.

The rest of the downstairs was a living room, and something that looked like a second, smaller living room but with more books and board games and a TV and stuff. Otherwise, it was just the bathroom, kitchen, and laundry room.

Upstairs was just three bedrooms and another bathroom, a couple of closets. Lots of windows, most of the coloring blue and green and gray, though 'his' bedroom was red and brown.

He wondered who had used it before. No hint of the former occupant remained, even most of the smell - not enough of it to give him some picture of the owner.

Not that he was really trying anymore, not after realizing he'd gotten some faint whiff of sex. It still felt like his face was on fire, cause that was so none of his business.

Still, probably a lover or something of Peter's? Which definitely meant it was none of his business.

Where was Peter? Well, down in the basement or whatever, but why was he still down there? It was almost lunch time.

Should he go outside, explore the yard?

Aargh, what was he supposed to do? Well, leave, and go be somewhere else, cause he never stayed in one place very long but then again he'd never been anywhere quite like this either.

He was giving himself a headache. Sighing, Lowell wandered back into the kitchen and sat down at the table. It was, for whatever reason, his favorite room to be in - assuming less than twenty four hours was enough time to pick a favorite room.

Maybe because one of his few good memories was of his stint as a cook's assistant. That had been fun, at least parts of it. Cutting stuff, frying it, grilling it, roasting, boiling...he so wished he could have hung around longer to learn more.

Wouldn't it be neat if he knew how to cook? Sadly, he just didn't know much. The diner had been an 'old-fashioned cooking' kind of place, and he hadn't been there long enough to learn all of it. Biscuits he remembered, and fried chicken but that had required a lot of work and he hadn't been allowed to do the actual cooking stuff though oh man had he watched and eaten the leftovers.

They'd had cereal and bananas for breakfast, and Sally had borrowed some eggs and he definitely knew how to cook eggs...

But was he allowed? Would he get in trouble?

He snorted at that. Get in trouble. Like that was new, or even mattered. He got in trouble, Peter kicked him out, that was that. Back to life as normal. It wasn't like this weird situation would last.

Shrugging, he slowly wandered the kitchen hunting down everything he thought he'd need, coming up with a skillet, eggs, butter, cheese, several things from a spice rack that made him gawk, a few other things and then he slowly started to get to work.

Scrambled eggs weren't really much, but it was the one thing he knew he could do without burning the house down. Or otherwise screw up. 'Werewolf and Kitchen Tragic Combination.' Frowning, he dumped the whisked eggs into the warmed skillet and watched carefully as they cooked.

He was so busy concentrating, on fretting about what would happen when - if - Peter came upstairs, that the new scent didn't register until a voice broke into his thoughts.

"Smells good."

Lowell jumped, the new scent hitting his nose even as he dropped his spatula and it clattered to the kitchen floor.

"Sorry!" The new guy, pushing up the glasses on his nose, smiled sheepishly. "I figured you'd know I was here, though you were looking pretty hard at those eggs."

Nodding, Lowell bent to retrieve the dropped spatula, then moved to the sink to wash it. "You smell like the vampire," he said slowly. "Uh. Are you allowed in here?"

"Yeah," the man replied. "Name's Jordan. I stopped by to meet the new werewolf my wife keeps going on and on about. I think I'd be jealous, except I know better." He winked, and briefly touched his neck, where Lowell could see what were obviously bite marks. He jerked his gaze away, realizing he was staring.

Jordan laughed softly, but it was a kind rather than a mean sound, or so Lowell thought but who knew? "Have you never seen vamp bites before?"

Lowell shook his head, feeling his cheeks grow hot, and turned back to save his eggs from burning. "I'm a loner."

"So was I, actually," Jordan replied. Then he grinned. "Vampire hunters by and large tend to be loners. There are exceptions, but most of us work alone." He moved closer to the stove. "Can I steal some?"

"You...want some of the eggs?" Lowell asked, surprised.

"They smell really good," Jordan said. "Don't tell her I said so, cause I'll die a slow and painful death, but Sally is much better at baking than cooking." He winked. "Of course, she's a vampire and rather an old one at that. Don't tell her I said that either."

Lowell stared at him.

Jordan smiled. "So can I have some eggs? Cause my cooking is worse than Sally's, though neither of us is nearly as bad as Peter. You'd think a man who dealt with formulae and stuff would be better at measuring out flour, but let me tell you the one day he tried to make a cake it-"

"Continue with that sentence, Jordan, and I'll tell your wife everything you just said," Peter said from the hallway, glaring at him.

"Whoops. Busted. Can I still have eggs?"

Peter moved into the kitchen, still glaring, but Lowell almost thought he looked amused too. "No, you may not, for attempting to tell humiliating stories about me."

"At least I didn't bring up the incident-"

"Finish *that* sentence and the next time I throw my handy little 'solar flares' down the chimney your vision will suffer a lot longer than twenty four hours."

Jordan laughed. "She was pissed with you, man. Sometimes I think I miss the good ol' days of courtship. I got away with more when she thought I was being a cute little human trying to flirt."



Peter rolled his eyes.

"Um," Lowell broke in hesitantly. "Do you want to eat?"

"Yes," Peter and Jordan chorused, breaking off their congenial bickering to fetch plates and forks, and before Lowell could blink his scrambled eggs were gone from the pan, on three plates - and mostly gone by the time he sat down to enjoy his own.

He listened as they continued to talk and bicker, eating his eggs quickly, trying not to smile because there was no good reason to smile, though he was glad his eggs didn't taste awful and that he wasn't in trouble.

The words 'vampire hunter' broke into his idle thoughts, and he looked up, speaking before he thought better of it. "What's a vampire hunter?"

As the talking ceased and they both looked at him in brief surprise, Lowell wished he'd remembered in time to keep his mouth shut.

Then Peter shook his head, and Jordan smiled ruefully. "You're not kidding," Jordan said with an easy smile. "He really did manage to avoid learning anything. How, though?"

Peter shrugged. "It wouldn't be hard, all things considered."

"True enough, I suppose," Jordan muttered.

Lowell wished he understood what they were talking about.

Jordan shook his head. "Sorry. Um, there are different kinds of vampires. What we in the business typically call Broken, Average, and Tops."

"Sally...Peter called her a Top."

"Yeah, that's right," Jordan said. "A vampire is considered a top when he's a hundred and eighty years old, or roughly three times the average span of a human life. That's about the point when they're well and truly adjusted to being vampire rather than human, and can more or less be trusted not to go on massive killing/making sprees. Uh, making as in 'making more vampires' cause they're only allowed to make so many per century."

Lowell nodded, not sure he got it but it was still more than he'd ever known.

Jordan continued. "Average vampires are the middle ones, the young ones, those turned that seem to be doing well but haven't reached that definitive point yet. Most of them won't, 'cause forgetting how to be human is hard."

"Broken vampires are those that aren't well-made, or simply don't take, as well as some averages who over time can't take it. Vampire hunters come in two main grades - those who hunt broken vamps and those averages who break the rules, and then those who watch over the tops."

"Uh, okay," Lowell said. He wanted to ask more questions, cause he totally didn't get half of it, but a more pressing question burned to be asked. "Is there, um, stuff like that for werewolves?"

The two men exchanged a look. Lowell hated when people did that. It never spelled good news for him.

Finally Peter spoke. "Werewolves...are something else entirely. There's a popular theory that vampires and werewolves are closely related. Both are transmitted through bites, both have a fatal allergy to silver, both are in some way tied to the night...and no one knows where or how they originate. The oldest of both races are long dead, and not even the oldest vampires, it's said, remembered much of anything about their origins. It's believed to be a combination of science and magic, some experiment that had two end results. We'll never know for certain."

"What we do know," Jordan said, "is that vampires became jealous of werewolves. They saw to it that almost all werewolves were wiped out, and I'm sure they'd all be gone except there were enough who helped at least some werewolves survive. Sally, for instance, never hated them."

Lowell stared. "Jealous?" he asked.

"Yes," Peter said, fidgeting with his glasses. "Most only change with a full moon, so once a month...otherwise they are mostly human, able to blend with humans better...and can move about in daylight. More important still, they can mate with

humans, and do not require human blood to live. Vampires are more powerful, and immortal...but they lose much of the freedom which werewolves retained."

Jordan pushed his own glasses up his nose, and Lowell thought it was kind of funny they both did that. "For a time, it was said some of the best vampire hunters in the world were werewolves. Even today, there's a pretty famous family in the business that people swear have werewolf blood in their veins."

Lowell frowned. "How can they have wolf blood and not be werewolves? That doesn't make sense."

"It's like anything passed on through blood," Peter said. "Over time, if not kept strong, it fades and thins out. I doubt there's much of it left, especially if no werewolves have popped up in the bloodline after so many years."

Jordan snorted. "One never knows with that loud and proud lot."

Lowell shook his head, utterly confused. "I don't get it. What do you mean passed on through blood?"

Dismay flickered across Peter's face. "Ah-I keep forgetting, even as we discuss this, that you just don't know these things. Not all werewolves are the result of biting. Some are simply born. It's passed through genetics as easily as through a bite. Though, it's rare. Often it just sits dormant. Like in the case of the hunter family we were just discussing. Depends."

"Oh," Lowell said quietly. "Um...could that, uh, be why I don't remember getting bitten?"

"Probably," Peter said gently. "Very likely, you had a parent who was a werewolf. I could not say for certain, of course, but if you do not have a bite scar..."

I don't," Lowell said quietly, staring at his empty plate. It didn't really matter, of course, how he'd become a werewolf... except...if his mother or father had known what he might be born as...why would they abandon him to it? Why had no one told him? Why had no one cared?

Stupid questions, for which he would never find answers, so it was pointless wondering. So he was a born werewolf rather than a made. He felt stupid for not knowing such a thing was possible, but ultimately it didn't make a difference so he should just stop wondering.

Peter and Jordan were looking at him uneasily, and exchanging looks again, but Lowell didn't want to know this time. He'd had more than enough information for one day.

Standing, he gathered up the plates and skillet and moved to the sink to wash the dishes.

"You don't have to do that," Peter said, standing up and joining him at the sink. "You cooked, I'll wash. House rules."

Jordan snorted, earning a glare from Peter, and then fell silent.

"Here, go sit down," Peter said with a smile, and Lowell meant to protest - he really did, because he was the one mooching off of Peter so the least he could do was cook and clean as best he was able...but it was hard to muster an argument against that smile, and it was already distracting enough how good Peter still smelled.

He really needed to figure that out. Distracted by his own thoughts, he returned to the table and obediently sat down, toying restlessly with a paper napkin.

"So are you going to resume the experiments then?" Jordan asked into the silence.

"No," Peter said sharply, turning around.

Jordan held up his hands. "I didn't know, man. Neither did Sally. Thought I'd ask. Why not?"

"Because there will never be a cure," Peter said, voice still sharp, but Lowell could detect a trace of sadness in it. "After so many years of trying, I am willing to admit an exercise in futility at last. Stacey was the last straw."

"Stacey," Jordan said contemptuously, "deserved to be taken into the woods and-"

"That's enough!" Peter said, all but shouting the words - and punctuated by the plate that shattered as it slipped from his hands. "Damn it." He sighed and walked gingerly across the kitchen, vanishing into the laundry room and returning with a broom and dustpan. "Just stay there," he said, motioning for Lowell to sit when he would have stood to help.

Jordan grimaced. "I'm sorry, Peter."

Peter sighed as he dumped broken porcelain into the trash, and started sweeping the floor a second time. "No. You're right. I know it. Still a sore subject I guess."

Lowell wondered if maybe he should leave. He so hated not knowing what was going on. Was he part of the problem? Stacey was a werewolf, and one who had known Peter...and he wondered how they had known each other, given how upset and all Peter got.

He bit back any questions though. He didn't know much, but he knew when to keep his mouth shut.

"Maybe now's a good time for me to take my leave, before I shove my foot so far into my mouth I start choking on it," Jordan said. He stood and clapped Peter on the back, waved to Lowell, and then was gone.

Peter started to speak when the back door abruptly opened again.

"I think you've got a patient coming, Doc," Jordan said, holding up a hand to forestay whatever remark Peter was about to make. "Looks like Ms. Holly's truck."

"Oh, great," Peter said with a sigh. He rolled his eyes, and then vanished briefly to return the broom and dustpan to the laundry room.

Lowell sat, wishing he knew what he was supposed to do.

Jordan vanished again, and Peter pinched the bridge of his nose.

After a moment he looked up, and a weak smile curved his mouth. "You look more than a little confused, Low. I apologize for being so obtuse and unpleasant. Stacey is an unpleasant subject for-" He broke off as a car horn blared, and heaved a long sigh as it faded.

Wry amusement lit his eyes as he turned again to Lowell. "Ms. Holly is one of the town Gossips. She comes here every couple of days to try and weasel out of me whatever I might know about everyone else who has been to see me - and she knows exactly who has been out here." He rolled his eyes as a sharp buzzer rang throughout the house. "I will bet my laboratory she's here to see you, so best come and get it over with." He winked, then motioned for Lowell to follow him.

Bemused, Lowell went obediently, trailing along as they went from the living portion of the house to the clinic areas.

"Ms. Holly," Peter said cheerfully, smiling and holding out his hands to the woman who harrumphed loudly before setting her hands in his. Peter kissed her cheek. "You look as wonderful as always. What ails you, my dear lady?"

If she heard anything he said, she made no show of it, her bright green eyes solely for Lowell.

She smelled like medicine and stale flowers, a little bit like honey, and man did he know her type - Scary Old Lady. He backed up as she let go of Peter to come toward him, looking warily at the massive handbag hanging from her forearm. He swore they carried bricks in those things.

No way was he getting in range of the thing.

"My, my, you are a handsome one, aren't you?" Ms. Holly muttered. "Sally wasn't kidding."

"Sally?" Peter said sharply. "What in the hell has that bloodsucker been saying now?"

Ms. Holly glared at him. "You should not call her ladyship by such a crass term. Honestly, Peter, your mother instilled manners in you. Make use of them."

Lowell frowned. She really shouldn't speak to Peter like that, especially since Sally didn't care if he called her a bloodsucker. He rather thought it was like the way she called Peter Mad Scientist...though he'd only been here a night and a day, so what did he really know?

"Anyway," Ms. Holly continued with a sniff. "She said only that Peter had a new housemate, and he was young and very handsome. I see she did not lie."

Peter shook his head. "If you wanted to come for a visit, Ms. Holly, you could have simply knocked on the front door."

"Bah!" Ms. Holly said, flapping one arm furiously back and forth, the floral pattern of her knee-length, long-sleeved dress moving wildly enough it almost made Lowell dizzy. He wondered what the point of the dress was, cause it really didn't look good, but he sensed saying such a thing would be more fatal to his continued existence than silver. "I'm too busy to run

about on frivolous pursuits of curiosity." She turned with a weird sort of flounce toward the back room, saying something about a painful cough.

Lowell looked at Peter, who rolled his eyes. "She's never been sick a day in her life," Peter said. "She just seems to think none of us knows we're being interrogated." He winked. "You can go find something more amusing to do, if you like. Sorry about all this. Price of small towns is popping up in the local gossip periodically." He laughed, and winked again. "I bet most of my visits the rest of the day and night will all be people wanting a look at my young and handsome boarder. Go have fun, I'll see you for dinner."

With that, he strode after Ms. Holly, leaving Lowell feeling more than a little dazed and confused. He hadn't cared at all when Ms. Holly had called him handsome, or even that she'd been repeating Sally's words. He didn't believe it. Even on those few other occasions he'd been cleaned up, no one had called him handsome.

Yet hearing Peter say the exact same thing made his cheeks feel hot, made him all the more painfully aware of just how yummy Peter always smelled.

Oh, great. That explained the smell at least in part, and of course the fact that Peter was being nice to him for no good reason would amplify it - it was just that those who stirred lust didn't normally have such a smell, so he hadn't quite connected it.

Typical of his stupid life to feel a bit of lust for someone who was just being nice, and probably would begin to hint - if not outright demand - that he move on.

Shaking his head, Lowell turned and went to go finish the dishes and mop the floor to get up any remaining glass. His skills were few, but among them was a hell of a talent for mopping floors. 'Wolf Mops Floor, Housewives Turn Green With Envy.' Snorting softly, Lowell banished the silly thought and went to find a mop and bucket.

## Part Two: Full Moon

Lowell slowly dragged his eyes open, pushing back the warm covers and sitting up. He dragged a hand through his hair and blinked to clear his sleep-blurred vision. The air was cool, and he fought a sleepy urge to pull the covers back up and return to dreamland.

Something had woken him up, and even barley half-awake he knew better than to ignore such a thing - especially since it was strange he was still half-asleep. That wasn't like him.

Clambering out of bed, he fumbled for a t-shirt and pulled it on, then sat down to pull on some socks before finally padding to the door and stepping cautiously into the hallway. No lights were on, he could hear no noise...no sense of danger, merely a vague feeling of something being different.

He glanced again toward the door to Peter's room. No light at all, so he was still in bed probably...

Shaking his head, Lowell moved quietly down the stairs, examining each room of the downstairs before scratching his head in confusion. He turned to go back and give the clinic another look over when he noticed something that was strange - the back porch light was off. Peter always left all the porch lights on. People, he said, visited him at all hours of the night and many felt more comfortable doing so if they saw the lights on.

Nothing smelled strange, so no guests had come by...

Hesitating, he finally shrugged and just opened the door.

Peter.

Lowell stood in the doorway, confused as to what to do now. He had thought Peter still in bed, and yet here he was sitting in the dark with a glass of something that was definitely alcohol with the lights off.

Definitely an 'I want to be alone' sort of thing.

He turned to leave.

"I wondered if I'd wake you," Peter said, just as he grabbed the door to shut it.

"Sorry," Lowell said. "I thought you were in bed. I didn't know what had woken me. I can go."

Peter turned to face him, smiling gently. "No need, if you're inclined to stay. I was just out enjoying the night. It's very good for brooding. Come, sit, unless you'd rather return to your bed - which I would wholly understand."

Lowell closed the back door and moved slowly to sit down next to him. The back of the house was a large wooden porch, looking over a backyard that was all hill, the bottom spilling into a creek and dense forest. They sat in deep, wooden lawn chairs set roughly in the center. Relaxing back in the seat, Lowell realized he had a perfect seat for watching the stairs.

The glass Peter held clinked as he set it down on the porch. "So do you like it here, Low?"

Was it stupid to always feel sort of flustered by the way Peter kept shortening his name? Lowell couldn't remember the last person who had bothered to remember his name, let alone shorten it. "Yes," he said quietly. He liked it way too much. A week and a half into his stay, he felt sick every time he thought of the inevitable moment when Peter would ask him to leave.

"I do," he said quietly. "It's totally different than other places."

People were always bringing Peter food, and they always wanted to see Lowell and it sort of freaked him out when they tried to pinch his cheek or stroke his hair but at least they weren't trying to hit him or shoot him or anything.

Sally was even teaching him how to cook - just a few hours ago they'd been doing their best to burn down Peter's kitchen making fried chicken and biscuits and co slaw.

He wished they'd tell him to leave before he got too attached.

"I'm glad," Peter said. "You fit in well. Much better than Stacey ever did." He sighed softly, and picked up his alcohol again.

Lowell frowned, wanting to ask. It wasn't hard for even an idiot like him to realize Peter and Stacey had been way more than roommates or even friends. Remembering Stacey's smiles, his charm, the way he'd so cheerfully explained there was doctor working on a cure...

How stupid he'd been! He wanted to find Stacey and do violent things. Seeing the sadness in Peter's face...he wanted to do <i>extremely</i> violent things.

"He does it to get back at me," Peter said quietly, staring into his drink. "I was never able to be exactly what he wanted, and I couldn't figure out the cure...and, well..." He sighed softly. "This is not your problem, I apologize. I came out here because I was obviously in a brooding mood."

Lowell looked toward him - and realized abruptly that Peter was bare-chested. Funny he hadn't noticed that before. He was glad the dark hid his suddenly hot cheeks. "Uh-everyone broods? I don't mind. You're way nicer to me than anyone else has ever been, and I don't do anything but wander around and try to destroy your kitchen. So, um, brood. Stacey was your, uh... um..." He ducked his head, realizing how stupid and rude he was being - and staring at Peter's bare chest did not help his brain function at all.

Peter laughed in his gentle way. "My lover, yes. He lived here five years, and we were lovers for two of them." He sighed softly. "I cannot blame him for hating me, not really. So many years and I've discovered nothing. After he left, I gave it up for good." His hand tightened around the glass, face twisted with bitter misery - a feeling Lowell was all too acquainted with - before it smoothed out again.

"You are more than welcome to stay for as long as you like," Peter said. "I don't know that I've made that clear. Having someone else around makes me happy...especially werewolves..." He smiled faintly, then tilted his glass back and polished off the contents in one long swallow. "I've told you before, and you've seen for yourself...this village is unusually friendly towards supernatural types. Most of that is Sally's work; she's been here since pilgrims first landed. This little town has <i>always</i> been her territory. But some of it..." He set his glass down and gave another sigh.

Lowell frowned, wishing he knew what to say or do. It was obvious Peter wanted to talk, yet hesitated... 'Werewolf Makes Lousy Psychologist; Doctor Succumbs to Misery' Scowling, he reached out and lightly touched the back of Peter's hand. "Uh, some of the people who keep faking sick made it sound like it was normal to have werewolves here. Is that possible? I've never seen many werewolves."

Peter turned his hand, and held Lowell's briefly for a moment. "Yeah, werewolves are normal. There used to be a full pack living here. They moved away almost fifteen years ago." Pain twisted his face.

His words drew Lowell up short. A pack? Werewolves...there were enough of them to do that? They wanted to do that? Werewolves actually shared space? Then why had no one ever wanted to hang with him? He swallowed. Was he a freak

even amongst other freaks?

This wasn't about him, though. He was used to being unwanted. Peter was kind to him, he could try to return the favor. "Why did they leave?" he asked.

"Anger, pain...hatred...." Peter shook his head. "I guess I really am feeling sorry for myself tonight." He smiled ruefully. "That's why I hoped I wouldn't wake you. Should have known better, given how close we are to the full moon."

Lowell cringed at the reminder, though it was true enough. All his senses were heightening, improving to an almost painful degree. He hated this part, because he already smelled and heard everything to a super-acute degree. There were some things he just did not want to better smell.

Such as Peter.

Why oh why did he have to be so stupid as to think his host was hot? Couldn't he just be grateful for the kindness and having some sort of companion rather than want something he'd never in a million years actually get?

He finally managed to shrug. "Doesn't bother me. So, uh, did you know the werewolves really well then?" Had one of them been Peter's lover too? The thought made Lowell's stomach knot, and he scowled at himself.

Peter laughed, and Lowell had never heard such an unhappy sound. "Yeah, I knew them. They-"

Lowell leapt to his feet as a <i>smell</i> struck his nose, combined with the sound of a car on the road in front of the house. Blood and leather and silver, a trace of something that was dog - and yet not just dog. It held a hint of something that reminded him of Jordan.

Growling low, barely realizing he was doing so, he abandoned the porch and strode back inside, bolting down the hallway to the front door. Throwing it open, he spilled out into the front yard to see a car pulling to a stop in Sally's driveway.

A man climbed out, accompanied by the largest greyhound Lowell had ever seen. He stopped at the edge of Peter's yard, hands not quite balled into fists, wondering who the heck the strange man and dog were. It must early early morning, who in the world paid a visit at this hour?

Well, he was visiting a vampire.

Sure enough, the door flew open a moment later and Sally came spilling out, porch light revealing her to be dressed in a dizzying array of blues and greens, silver and gold glinting amongst her beads and baubles.

"Clarence!" she exclaimed cheerfully. "There you are, I was beginning to worry. You're nearly an hour late." She swatted him on the arm.

The man - Clarence - laughed. "There was fog for a good stretch, slowed me down."

Lowell wondered what he should do. Obviously he needed to stay in bed the next time something weird woke him up. 'Nosy Werewolf Gets Just Desserts.'

He started to turn when he heard Peter coming up behind him - and the massive greyhound, so unlike the few he'd ever seen, moved toward him.

She whined softly as she reached him, laying down and then turning over to expose her belly.

Lowell frowned, because dogs did that to him all the time, and bent to pet her.

"Wouldn't do that if I were you," Peter said quietly. "It'll hurt to touch her."

"What?" Lowell asked, turning to frown at Peter as he came up to stand beside Lowell.

"Yeah," a new voice agreed.

Lowell jerked his head back around to see that Clarence and Sally were crossing the street. Clarence was looking at his dog in faint amusement. He whistled softly, and the greyhound immediately rose and went to sit next to him.

Clarence smiled. "She's a vampire hunting dog," he said. "Specially bred, specially fed. There's enough silver in her, part of her, that you'd probably cause yourself some pain touching her."



He'd smelled the silver, but thought it a lingering trace from the silver he could smell on Clarence. Now that he was paying attention, it was easy to pick it out as part of her blood, her body. "How do you do that?"

"Tincture of the Moon," Peter said quietly, kneeling to beckon to and pet the greyhound. "Vampire hunter secret, something that helps them literally infuse the dogs with an 'essence of silver'. I've never been able to make it work with werewolves." The words were said with no small amount of bitterness.

Lowell wondered what it meant that the bitterness got to him more than the fact that there would likely never be a cure for his werewolf-ness. Maybe because he was used to dealing with the latter, and he had no idea how to deal with the pain of someone he was growing to like, wholly aside from the fact Peter was nice to him.

"You'll get it eventually, man," Clarence said, moving closer. He extended his hand abruptly, startling Lowell. "You're the wolf Sally told me about."

"Um..." Lowell stared at the hand, confused. Then he abruptly realized what Clarence was doing. He slowly held out his own, and shook Clarence's hand. "Um. My name is Lowell. You, uh, smell sort of like Jordan but not really." He flushed, realizing how stupid he sounded.

Clarence laughed, and Lowell dared to look up again.

He was handsome, Lowell supposed. Really tall, dark hair and eyes. He looked like it wouldn't be too hard for him to pick Lowell up and throw him across the yard, and his handshake had only confirmed that impression. The smell of blood and leather and silver came from him.

"I'm a vampire hunter," Clarence said. "I work this neck of the woods, and checking up on Sally every now and then is part of what I do. What they call a top hunter."

"Oh," Lowell said, struggling to remember what they'd told him about vampire hunters. Not much, he didn't think. "Jordan used to be a hunter, right?"

Sally snickered. "Yeah, he did. Clarence was pulled away to do something else, and he asked Jordan to come pay me a visit - the rest, as they say, is history." She rolled her eyes. "A very colorful history."

Peter and Clarence laughed.

"Didn't think to see another werewolf after..." Clarence shrugged at a look from Peter. "Just saying, man. Good to see one. This place just isn't the same without your family running about the place."

Oh. Oh. The werewolves Peter had been talking about had been his family?

Lowell looked at Peter, whose expression had closed up. Why would his family leave? Why would Peter stay and not go with them? What in the world was going on and had he wound up with an axe murderer after all? 'Werewolf Becomes Meal to Crazy Werewolf Enthusiast.'

Yet, seeing the expression - or lack thereof - on Peter's face, he couldn't even sort of believe that. Whatever had happened, it really hurt Peter. He wished he could ask, that it was his business.

"So are we going to stand around in the street all night, or shall we go inside and sit like civilized vampires, werewolves, and hunters?" Sally said, bright voice cutting through the sudden tension. "I vote Peter's house, since I really don't want to wake Jordan. He's tired from feeding me."

Peter rolled his eyes, but turned and strode to his house, motioning for the others to follow him. Lowell followed quickly, wanting for some reason to stay close to Peter, not liking how unhappy he was - or that other people were making his already unhappy mood worse, and he wondered if he'd get kicked out if he tried to make the others leave.

Like he had any right to do that - what was wrong with him? Maybe he just needed to go back to bed. After a week and half here, and never really having had much of a schedule in his life, he was adjusting easily to the odd hours kept by Peter - work and stuff in the morning, lunch followed by a long nap, then up 'til one or so in the morning. Of course, at any time of the day or night patients arrived, so even that odd schedule was not set in stone.

Lowell didn't care, he liked waking up in the same place every morning and not being beaten or hauled away by cops.

Inside, he went straight to the coffee maker and got it going, fetching Peter's mug and his own. He hesitated on a third, looking at Clarence. When he nodded, Lowell pulled down a third mug and set them all by the coffee maker.

Then he stood feeling a bit lost. "Uh, would anyone like anything to eat?"

"Whatever you've got," Clarence said promptly, ignoring the glare Peter sent him. "I see you're the courteous half of the household. That particular element was always missing."

"Says a man whose job is to be nosy," Peter said with a roll of his eyes. "If I'm rude, it's just because I follow the example of present company."

Sally smirked. "Personally, I think all men present should follow your example and walk around half-naked."

Peter swore, and Lowell tried not to stare at the way his cheeks went suddenly pink before Peter fled the kitchen and stomped up the stairs.

He went to the fridge as Sally laughed and Clarence softly chuckled, pulling out what was left of the fried chicken and slaw, the cherry pie that Sally had made for them. Wasn't there some...oh, there they were. He grabbed the mashed potatoes, the leftover gravy beside it, then shut the fridge with his foot and carried the mass in his arms to the table. Sally helped him get it all in order, and Lowell moved to fetch the biscuits from where they were in a container on the counter.

"Oh, man. Real food. I haven't had that in forever. You are the coolest werewolf ever, hands down."

Sally shook her head and smiled at Lowell, as though they were sharing some private amusement.

It was so weird being treated like he was normal. He kept waiting for the catch. 'Werewolf Killed By Kindness; Kindness Prefers Semiautomatics'.

Setting the biscuits down, he returned to the fridge for drinks as Sally stood up to fetch plates and cups.

He turned as he smelled and heard Peter returning, both relieved and disappointed to see he'd changed into old jeans and a dark blue t-shirt.

Which reminded Lowell abruptly that he was still in his own night clothes. Setting the pitcher of iced tea and a couple of beers on the table, he left to go get changed, pulling on jeans that were just a bit too long, and a t-shirt that fit perfectly. Had these clothes belonged to Stacey? Someone else? Was he wearing the clothes of all the other wolves who had lived here?

The thought made him want to growl, and he shook his head at himself. Maybe being well fed and well rested was bad for him - obviously not having to struggle for food was giving his wolf aspects a chance to get worse. He'd have to watch it... especially given how appealing he found Peter.

He didn't want to get carried away with some werewolf thing he didn't understand and screw up the only good thing to ever happen to him. Screwing it up would so be his luck, but maybe he could somehow change his luck just this once. 'Werewolf Has Delusions of Grandeur.'

Going back downstairs, he saw that a plate had been made up for him - and he was seated right next to Peter, who was bickering colorfully with Sally. Lowell let his gaze wander, and took note of the way Clarence was looking at something just out of sight - his dog, obviously.

"Um, is she hungry?" he asked.

Clarence looked up. "Hm? Oh, no, she's fine. I'm getting the woeful I am starving puppy eyes, but she's just fine. So you're changing tomorrow, right? Vamps like full moons, since they're so bright. I think with most, it's the no more sunlight that's hardest to get used to."

Sally shrugged. "Probably. It's been so long, I don't recall. I never ask the others, they get too wigged out by me."

"You shouldn't be so flashy," Clarence teased lightly, chuckling when Sally shook a bracelet-laden wrist at him. He turned back to Lowell. "So how old are you? You look about eighteen, though it's so hard to tell anyone's age. My last lover could have passed for nineteen but he was twenty six. Not that he ever corrected anyone who thought he was nineteen." He rolled his eyes.

Lowell frowned, confused. "I do not know. Why does my age matter so much? Is there some werewolf thing I don't know?"

"Enough," Peter snapped. "Leave him alone."

"Okay, okay, sheesh," Clarence said, holding his hands up. "I didn't mean any harm, and someone neglected to tell me to keep my mouth shut." He glared at Sally.

Sally patted his hand. "There's no point. Men never keep their mouths shut anyway."

"Oh, yes, and who is head of the village gossips?" Peter demanded.

"I am the village top," Sally said loftily. "It is my duty to be apprised of all situations."

Peter rolled his eyes.

Lowell wondered if he could go back to bed. He ate in silence, doing his best to be invisible, hoping he wasn't asked any more questions that made him feel like he was the only one in the room missing out on the joke. He hated feeling like that. Why didn't they just tell him? That was two people now whom Peter had told to shut up after they asked about his age.

It seemed important that he was eighteen?

He really hated being a werewolf who didn't know anything about his own disease or whatever. Lowell stabbed at his mashed potatoes, then set his fork down with a sigh and reached for his coffee. Sweet and creamy, which meant Peter had made it - thankfully he hadn't let Sally. It was obvious she probably had never once had coffee in her entire life.

Setting it down again, he returned to making a half-hearted effort at eating. Normally he ate like...well...a wolf. He should be eating so now, because who knew when the regular feedings would stop? One day it would be back to scrounging for food in every conceivable place, a few of those wretched enough to make him cry, so he should not be moping instead of eating right now. Seriously, he was already getting spoiled on having a taste of normal life.

Fingers touched his shoulder lightly, and he dragged his eyes up to Peter, who was looking at him in concern. "Don't worry on it. I assure you there's nothing about which you should worry. Just ignore us, hmm?"

Lowell shrugged. "I, uh, kinda wish I did know my age, you know? But I don't. Not even sure how I got my name, it's just what I remember being called, and I don't remember if the orphanage had a fam-family name for me." He ducked his head and bit into his chicken before any more stupidity fell out of his mouth.

"Ouch, okay, I can take a hint," Clarence said. "I really didn't mean to upset anyone. Just curious. I'll keep it to myself."

Peter smiled faintly. "No, you won't. Curiosity is your middle name."

"Yeah, yeah. Can I have another beer?"

"I'm impressed you bothered to ask," Peter replied dryly.

"I figure I'm in enough trouble," Clarence said with a smile, and stood to fetch another beer from the fridge. He sat down again, idly petting the head of his greyhound, who rest it on his thigh. "So this neighborhood is getting exciting again. Sally, how is Jordan? Given more thought to..."

Sally shrugged. "It's too soon yet to tell. We'll see in a decade or so if he's suitable for turning."

"Suitable for turning?"

"Yeah," Sally said softly. "He's asking about my turning Jordan into a vampire. I've had other beaus in the past, but none of them had what it took to endure immortality." She shook her head. "I had a husband as a mortal, too..." She looked briefly sad. "We had a daughter. Illness took them not long after we arrived here. Funny the things you do remember, even after a few hundred years." She shrugged. "I think Jordan will work, but it's just too soon to say. Age determines it, and he's young yet."

Peter snorted. "Jeez, Clarence. I realize you vampire hunters are all idiots, but surely you can come up with a happy topic of conversation?"

Clarence smiled sheepishly. "Obviously not. Not even any interesting new hunter gossip, since I was last around."

Sally leaned over the table and kissed his cheek. "No harm, dear hunter. Now, I say you boys make fresh coffee and then we will cut this cherry pie for you."

A knock at the door drew their attention, and Sally smiled as she caught the shadow through the blind over the glass window in the top half of the door. She opened it and gently tugged Jordan inside, kissing him softly. "Rested, sweetheart?"

"Of course," Jordan said with a yawn, undermining his words by wrapping his arms around Sally's waist and resting his head on her shoulder.

Laughing softly, Sally kissed his brow, then dragged him to the table and pushed him into the chair next to hers. Then she bustled about cleaning away dishes and fetching new ones, giving Lowell a warning look when he tried to help her.

In due order there was fresh coffee - made by himself - and cherry pie, and Lowell dug into it happily, worries of only a moment ago briefly buried by the sweet, tart dessert. He listened, eyes growing heavier by the second, as the group talked quietly about different people they knew, Jordan and Clarence talking about hunting, Peter offering his own dry comments here and there.

He barely noticed when a hand covered his, and only slowly lifted his head to look up at Peter. "Sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for," Peter replied, gently pulling and pushing until Lowell was standing and going obediently toward the stairs. He heard the others leaving, the door closing, someone turning out the kitchen lights...then he just felt Peter's hand on his back, easy and warm, making all the more acute the dratted smell that was probably going to drive him crazy here shortly.

Tomorrow night he was going to turn wolf; he really hoped he didn't do something stupid then. It was so much harder to be normal in wolf form...and the circumstances this time were wholly different.

Maybe he should just lock himself in his room, or maybe head off into the woods so he was well away from anywhere he might cause trouble.

Except once he turned, no doubt he'd undo all his own hard work.

He blinked and sleepily shook his head as they reached his room, and smiled up at Peter. "Sorry. Are you going to bed?"

Peter smiled faintly, and reached up to tousle his hair. "Yes, vampires and hunters wear even me out. Get some rest, I'm sorry I woke you."

"No, uh, it was fine." Lowell tried to smile, scrubbing a hand through his hair, noting absently he much preferred the feel of Peter's hand doing the same thing. "Um. Good night. Or, uh, good morning?"

Laughing, Peter briefly gripped his shoulder, then wandered down the hall to his own room, the door closing quietly behind him.

Lowell stood watching it for several minutes, then with a sigh finally turned away to find his own bed.

He'd just picked up his discarded sleep pants when the back of his neck prickled. Dropping the pants, he abandoned his room and went back downstairs, pausing briefly before finally decided to go out the back door.

It was quiet - too quiet. The barest hints of morning were beginning to lighten the sky, nothing but threads of gray.

The wind shifted, and suddenly he could <i>smell</i> it. He barely noticed the growl that lodged in his throat, and when the intrusive scent drew closer he threw himself without thought over the porch railing and down onto the hill below - and shifted as he did so, a large wolf as he hit the thick forest at the base of the hill.

Snarling he weaved his way through the trees, headed straight for the threat, the enemy. He would not tolerate unwelcome persons in his territory. It was his now, the others would get out.

Breaking through the forest into a clearing, he growled at the intruder.

The man froze. Lowell could smell his fear. Good. He barked loud, high and sharp - ordering the intruder to back off or fight properly. When the man didn't move, Lowell again barked, forcing the issue. One last, reverberating growl - and the man obediently changed before his eyes.

Lowell threw himself at the intruder, giving no quarter, fighting for all he was worth because this was all <i>his</i> and this wolf had no right and was not welcome and he would go or die. That was the way of things.

He snarled as the intruder attacked, throwing him off and lunging in for a bite of his own, drinking down the scream of pain, dragging the wolf to the ground and then-

"Lowell!"

He jerked around as the smell and scent of his mate reached him - and then barely dodged the teeth that came at him. Snarling with renewed fervor, he threw himself back at the intruder, going for his throat-

"Lowell, stop!"

Growling low, he barked sharply once at the intruder, then quickly backed off, padding over to the one he protected, pushing into the hands that stroked him, soothed and calmed, letting the anger bleed away - though he never forgot the vile intruder who lingered still.

The world smelled of blood, from the intruder and the drinkers. He could hear them talking, but did not follow the words, merely pressed closer to his mate and let himself be assured that all was well.

He growled and jerked his head up as he heard the intruder growing closer. However, the intruder only whimpered, limping and bleeding, begging him quietly.

Lowell ignored him. If the intruder was not good enough to escape injury, then he could suffer his wounds. He did not smell like one doomed to die, so perhaps he would learn not to come uninvited into Lowell's territory.

His mate moved forward, slowly caressing his fur as he went, but Lowell growled in discontent all the same as his mate approached the intruder - and snarled in anger as the wolf abruptly lunged, biting down hard on his mate.

Springing forward, he sank his teeth into the vile intruder, shaking and growling, letting the taste of hot blood consume him, not relenting until the intruder collapsed in a trembling heap at his feet and whimpered in submission.

Growling one last warning, he turned to his mate, snarling at the drinkers who dared touch him, pushing and nosing until he could sniff the wound, examine it himself. He whined softly, licking his mate's face, pushing up against him, sharing his warmth.

"It's okay, Low," his mate said softly, petting him with his good arm, carefully holding his injured one against his chest. "Thank you."

The drinkers were talking again, and now he noted one who smelled like drinkers and silver...and another, one like him but not. She was okay. He growled approval as she drew close and showed proper deference.

He turned back to his mate, refusing to let another draw close.

"Low," his mate said softly, still petting and caressing. "Can you change?"

Growling, understanding the request, Lowell focused - and shifted back to his other form.

Lowell stood, staring and blinking, wondering what the hell was going on.

He could see Peter, who was bleeding. What? Why? Oh no, what had he done?

Something whimpered and he turned to see an injured werewolf lying on the ground - blood, so much blood.

"Lowell!!!"

He heard Sally call his name, and the others, Peter's voice louder than all the rest but it was obvious he'd done some crazy werewolf thing and he'd hurt <i>Peter</i> and oh god what was he going to do now?

"I'm sorry!" He said - then promptly passed out.

\*~\*~\*

Lowell woke with a gasp, chased out of sleep by nightmares of wolves fighting, the taste of blood in his mouth.

His hand shook as he lifted it to his face. What was wrong with him? Why was he having such horrible dreams? He'd never do that to someone else. It wasn't his style to be so <i>angry</i>. If it was, he'd have been arrested for murder rather than trespassing a dozen times over.

At least it was just a dream, right? Weird dream, maybe it had something to do with the fact he'd be changing tonight. Usually he loathed his change because he had nowhere to safely hide, or was hungry and tired and stuff on top of the change itself. This time, he had none of that to worry about.

Only how stupid he would behave with Peter around.

So maybe his dumb brain was making up problems to occupy his time.

Still feeling kinda shaky, wishing he could discard the dream that insisted on clinging to him, Lowell reached for-

Why the hell was he naked?

He never woke up naked except when he changed, and it wasn't time to change.

Maybe it had to do with his dumb dreams?

Shaking his head, Lowell quickly grabbed his clothes and bolted across the hall to the bathroom.

Hot water made everything better, as did soap. By the time he'd finished, Lowell felt a little bit more normal. Pulling on his clothes, wiping the bathroom down and throwing his towel in the hamper, he finally padded down the stairs and into the kitchen.

He froze at the sight before him, eyes going wide, nostrils flaring.

Stacey stood in the kitchen, wearing nothing but sweats and a t-shirt and he was standing close to Peter and *touching* him and Lowell was across the kitchen before he knew what he was doing, shoving Stacey hard against the counter, grasping his wrists and pinning them down.

"Lowell!"

Peter's voice was a bucket of cold water.

Immediately Lowell let go, stumbling back, something heavy and painful lodging in his chest. "Oh, god. It wasn't a dream." He buried his face in his hands, then turned and fled, choking back sobs.

He bolted from the house, unable to stand being in it after all he'd done. How could Peter even stand to look at him? Put him back in bed? They should have shot him in the head and why couldn't he remember it all better?

Outside, he half-ran, half-stumbled down the porch steps, then down the hill and splashed across the creek, going into the woods until he could no longer see so much as a hint of the house - then kept going.

What was wrong with him? Why was he acting this way? Had he finally turned into some sort of awful monster? Peter! He remembered Peter had been bitten. Lowell drew up his knees and folded his arms across them, then buried his face in his arms. Oh, god. What was he going to do? He should just kill himself.

It wasn't fair! He'd always tried so hard to be a good werewolf. Staying away from people as best he could when he changed, running instead of fighting, not resisting the cops when they took him in, leaving the other werewolves alone like they wanted even though he didn't want to be alone himself...

Now he'd managed to screw up the only good thing to happen to him, and on top of that he'd ruined Peter's life! Maybe Peter wouldn't mind too much, since he liked wolves and his family apparently was all werewolves...

Except that wasn't the point. The point was that Lowell had finally gone insane and turned into a monster. He wondered why they hadn't just killed him, that would have been the smart thing to do - but Peter really was a nice guy, look at the way he'd taken Lowell in and put up with all the nosy townspeople and stuff.

Why had he done it? He was mad at Stacey, but not *that* mad. So why?

He wished he could remember! It was always so hard totally remembering everything he did as a wolf, and that bugged him because if he was both then shouldn't he be the same mind or whatever in both forms? Why was he so stupid as a wolf? Couldn't he have been smart enough in that form to remember how stupid it would be to fuck up what he'd found here with Peter?

Apparently not.

Damn it. He didn't want to leave - but he didn't want to stay and be a monster either. What if next time he actually killed someone?

Why had he been a wolf at all? The full moon was tonight! He'd never changed early before; he hadn't even known werewolves could change early. Surely even he, stupid and ignorant as he was, would have known if that were a possibility?



Ha. Who was he kidding? Of course he was that stupid and ignorant. 'Werewolf Dumbest On Planet, Studies Show.'

Sitting up, he wiped the tears from his cheeks and struggled to remember all he could.

He'd gone to bed. Then something had felt wrong. He remembered being angry, running to the porch - then he could only remember the forest, Stacey, blood, then Peter's voice...

Anger. He definitely remembered that damn anger. Stacey had made him *<i>furious</i>* and Lowell could not fathom why. Or maybe he didn't want to remember. All he did know was that Stacey was here and he didn't like it.

Really didn't like it, to judge by the way he'd gone all werewolf-like in the kitchen. If not for Peter...what would he have done?

Yet remembering how close they'd been standing, the way Stacey had been *<i>touching</i>* -- it made him see red all over again. If Stacey were here, he didn't doubt he'd go ballistic all over again.

He buried his face in his arms again, wanting everything to just go away, wishing Peter had never found him that night and he'd drowned in the stupid rain.

The sound of someone crashing through the brush brought his head up, and he realized suddenly he could smell Peter - and looked up just as the man himself came into view.

"Lowell," Peter said, relief in his voice "There you are. I was beginning to think you'd managed to well and truly hide yourself."

"I'm sorry," Lowell said miserably, fighting an urge to run because he didn't want Peter seeing him acting so pathetic on top of being a monster last night. When would life stop sucking? When would he just stop breathing?

He slowly looked up again as Peter knelt beside him. "Low, it's okay."

"It's not!" Lowell protested, feeling even more wretched at the way Peter kept calling him 'Low.' "I-I went crazy. I hurt people." He blinked furiously, only growing more upset because he wouldn't stop the stupid crying. "I hurt you."

Peter startled. "What? Oh, no, Low. Stacey bit me, not you."

Lowell went still. He slowly looked up. "I didn't bite you?"

"No, Low," Peter said gently, reaching out to gently brush back Low's hair. "You'd never bite me."

"I dunno," Lowell said miserably, wanting so bad to lean into the touch but he had no right to start with, and certainly not now that he was turning into a monster. "I seem to be going crazy. I swear I've never acted like that before. Usually I just try to find somewhere to sleep, I promise!"

All of a sudden he found himself pressed against Peter, who despite everything smelled warm and good and *<i>right</i>* and Lowell didn't understand any of this one little bit and he should be running away but somehow all he could do was hold tight and let Peter embrace him.

It didn't help at all that the only thing that apparently smelled better than Peter was the way their scents mingled. He wished it was okay to stay like this forever.

But he was a monster. He couldn't forget that for a minute. Forcing himself away, Lowell tried to look Peter in the face, but it was hard because he still acted so nice and kind and Lowell didn't understand it all. "I really am sorry, I've never acted like a monster before. I don't even remember it well, and that just makes it worse."

"Oh, Low..." Peter sighed softly, and then reached out to cup his face, stroking Lowell's cheeks with his thumbs. "You didn't act one bit like a monster - you acted like a werewolf. Nothing more."

"I've never done that before," Lowell said miserably. "Why did I change early? I didn't know we could do that."

"Most werewolves can't," Peter said.

Lowell stared at him, feeling suddenly cold, cause a statement like that... "So what am I, if not a normal werewolf?"

Peter shook his head, and let go of his face to grab his hands and slowly pull them both to their feet. "Come on, the middle of this forest is not the place to discuss this. I should have done it after you arrived..." He sighed and shook his head, and

held fast to Lowell's hand. "Inside, then we'll talk."

"What about...uh...Stacey?"

"I told him to make himself scarce," Peter said, squeezing his hand. "I'm sure precious few people would care if you did actually succeed in killing him, but I do not want you burdened by that."

Lowell almost started crying again. "I've never wanted to kill anyone before, and I don't now, except when-" He thought about Stacey touching Peter, and then he started feeling like a monster again.

"Well, if he's around right now, I'll probably punch him myself. I really am not pleased to see him."

Nodding, Lowell let himself be dragged along - and then began to wonder just how far he'd run. "How did you find me?"

"I followed your scent," Peter said with a smile. "That aside, no one knows these woods better than me. Much of it is my land, after all, and the rest may as well be for all the use it gets from everyone else."

"My scent?" Lowell repeated. "But...you're human...aren't you?"

Peter smiled at him again. "Yes and no, Low. Come on, let's get inside."

Lowell wanted to ask more questions, but he was hardly in a position to protest waiting a few more minutes for answers. Suddenly he just wanted another nap, as they trudged up the hill and back into house.

He obediently went to change into dry clothes at Peter's urging, but hesitated on going back downstairs. Gods, he was stupid. And a freak of the highest order, apparently. Swallowing, telling himself to stop being a coward, he finally forced himself to go back downstairs and into the kitchen.

Peter held out a cup of coffee, and Lowell slowly accepted it. "Um, I can uh, leave if you want. Which you must, I know, cause-"

His chin was grasped, and he didn't resist as Peter urged him to look up. "No, Low," Peter said softly. "If you want it to be, this is your home. I will never ask you to leave. I don't want you to leave. This is my fault, in the end. Come and sit, and I'll try to explain."

Stiffly Lowell obeyed, sliding into the bench as Peter indicated he should, staring across at where Peter took one of the chairs.

"You said I'm not a normal werewolf."

Peter laughed in his gentle way. "Oh, Low...the irony is that you're the most normal werewolf of all. It's the other ones, the ones partly human, that are technically freaks."

"The ones...are you saying I'm not human? Or something? Like the way I was born a werewolf, not bitten?"

"Yes..." Peter said, toying idly with his coffee cup. "No one really knows the true origins of vampires and werewolves...if there are vampires still alive who know the truth, they do not speak of it, and nearly all werewolves were wiped out, so there is no legacy left to tell us from that side... What we do know, Low, is that there is still by some miracle something we now call a 'purebred' werewolf."

"A...purebred? You mean like dogs or something?"

"Sort of," Peter said, "though I would never in a million years call you a dog, or in any way similar. Purebred werewolves are those werewolves who have untainted blood. There are all manner of theories about the origins of vampires and werewolves. One rather controversial theory is that once werewolves were a proper race. That either humans sought to copy them, or they sought to save themselves by mingling with humans... Most say humans sought the power of lycanthropy, and vampirism was a failed attempt at that."

Lowell waited.

Peter smiled faintly. "You are strong evidence for that theory, Lowell. As I said, you are purebred. It's very easy to pick out for those of us that are so intimately acquainted with werewolves. There is not a single drop of human blood in you. Through and through, you are werewolf. You said it always seemed like other werewolves didn't want to stay around you..."

"Yeah," Lowell said thinly, hands wrapping tightly around his coffee mug. "Are they scared of me?"

"Maybe a few...but I think it more accurate to say that they held you in awe...and were probably baffled when you gave no indication of knowing all that you are."

Lowell slumped. He was scary, even to other werewolves? How depressing.

Peter reached out and lightly touched his hand, pulling it away from the mug, holding it tight. "Don't worry so much, Low... now that you're learning more, it won't be so hard. You've also got me, for what little that is worth."

The knot in his chest unwound the slightest bit, the words stupidly reassuring for a reason Lowell could not name. "So is this, uh, purebred thing the reason I can change early? I know I've never done that before..."

"It's in part a purebred thing...but it's an exclusive power of alphas. You obviously don't remember that Stacey was a wolf as well."

Lowell startled, unconsciously tightening the hold he had on Peter's hand. "That's right, we were fighting. I tried to kill him - but how did he become a wolf? Is he purebred too?"

"No, Stacey is not purebred. He was only able to change because you forced him to change - that is the power of an alpha werewolf once he reaches his maturity and comes into his full power. The age of maturity in werewolves is roughly eighteen years, give or take a few months."

"Oh," Lowell said, feeling a little bit dazed, a little bit loopy. "What, uh, is an alpha?"

Peter laughed again, and with anyone else it would have stung but with Peter it just made him feel warm and less of a monster. "An alpha...is, simply put, the leader of the pack. You're meant to lead, to be in charge, to have wolves obey you and submit. That is why so many are intimidated by you, why dogs always prostrate, and even people to some degree have probably not been as rough with you as they might have otherwise been - though I'm sure that last you find hard to believe."

Lowell shrugged. He didn't believe it for a second. Cops left bruises, and people in their fancy houses with an income and full fridges got really fucking pissed about him stealing a little bit of grass to catch a few z's.

Him in charge? Of what? The idea was stupid. "I'm not an alpha. How could I be?"

"You've been homeless your entire life, Low, and no one has ever taught you about werewolves. Given half a chance, and I intend to give you far more than half, you will come well and fully into your own. That display last night proved loud and clear that you're an alpha, and will not tolerate threats to what you consider yours."

"So being an alpha means turning into a monster whenever wolves I don't like come around?"

Peter sighed softly, squeezing his hand tightly. "No, Lowell. That's not it at all." He smiled faintly. "You were protecting your home..." He hesitated. "You were protecting us."

Lowell frowned. That didn't sound quite right, and Peter was hesitating. His cheeks burned with humiliation. "This morning I attacked him because...because I didn't like him touching you. I almost killed him because he was touching you - that sounds like a monster to me."

"No," Peter said firmly. "That sounds like after going your whole life knowing nothing about werewolves, you somehow have managed to have everything dumped on you at once. I have tried to make everyone keep their mouths shut, because I knew too much too fast would cause you problems. You're not a monster - you're a werewolf. You were protecting me, Low..." He paused, and when he started speaking again, Peter's voice was low and soft. "You were protecting what you knew belonged to you."

"Belonged..." Lowell stared, cheeks growing hotter than ever. "But that-I don't-"

Peter let go of his hand and took off his glasses, then stood up. He moved around the table and pulled Lowell up. "I saw you sitting on the road and thought you were nothing more than a homeless person. I got out of the car and realized immediately you were a werewolf..."

He brushed back strands of Lowell's hair, eyes so intent and bright, naked without the glasses. "Once I got you out of the rain, I realized you were much, much more than I could ever have imagined. A purebred, an alpha...and by some strange twist of fate, I do believe we are mates."

"Mates?" Lowell asked, the word making him feel sort of dizzy, a sensation not helped at all by the way Peter kept

<i>touching</i> him. No one ever touched him, except to drag him off or beat him or get him to do some grungy task. "What does that mean?"

Peter's mouth curved in a smile that was equal parts amused and sweet. "It means that you smell as good to me as I smell to you."

"Oh," Lowell squeaked, and scrambled to get away, feeling one hundred percent stupid for being so thoroughly busted.

"It's okay, Low!" Peter said. "You should know that. Hell, I'm sort of baffled you have any interest in me at all, other than the fact I make good coffee." He winked, holding Lowell's face firmly between his hands. "I must have roughly nine years on you, and the quiet life of a small town doctor is not the sort of life most envy. Neither have you been here long, and far too much information has been dumped upon you."

Lowell nodded, or tried, but he was rather too overwhelmed to figure out words right now.

Peter slowly let him go, and the memory of his fingers tingled on Lowell's skin.

He swallowed. "So, uh, um...I really don't know what to say or do."

"I guess not," Peter said. "For now, I suggest we get breakfast, and we can talk a bit longer to help you feel a bit more steady." His face briefly clouded. "Then when Stacey shows his damned face again, we can figure out what the hell he was doing here-" He broke off as the back door opened, and Stacey strolled into the kitchen.

Lowell growled, unconsciously reaching out to hold fast to Peter, shoving him back, moving forward. "Go away," he snarled, unable to help it even as he wondered what the hell his problem was.

He was a purebred wolf. He was alpha. Peter...was his, uh, mate. Stacey was a jerk. Okay, he could work with that.

"Stacey..." Peter sighed. "Why are you here? You left swearing you would sooner kill yourself than come back. I don't want you here."

"Your fucking attack dog went ballistic on me," Stacey said.

Lowell bristled. "Shut up," he snapped - then stood sort of gawking at his own words, his own tone.

Stacey laughed. "It's cute how he's trying to be all tough."

Alpha. In charge. Stacey made Peter unhappy. "I wasn't the one bleeding to death in the forest," he said quietly. "I'm not the one who smells like blood and medicine."

"You-"

"Enough!" Peter said sharply. "Stacey, shut the fuck up or I will let him tear you to pieces. He's still coming into his full power, and likely to move more on instinct than rational thought, which means he will attack you first and ask questions later. Shut up, sit down, and explain what in the hell you're doing here."

Stacy rolled his eyes, opened the fridge and snatched out a carton of orange juice, then sat down at the table and drank straight from the carton. "How's that bite, Pete?"

"Shut up," Peter said tiredly. "You know damn good and well how it is."

"Yeah, but I bet that cub there doesn't. You into jailbait now, Pete?"

"His name is Peter, not Pete," Lowell said quietly, but firmly. He hesitated, then let his hatred of Stacey surface, let it course through him. "Get a glass for the juice, stop drinking out of the carton."

Stacey stared at him, blinking slowly several times - then he stood up and snagged a glass, stomping back to the table and pouring the orange juice into it. "Fucking weirdo wolf, I knew you were odd when I first saw you."

Lowell said nothing, merely fetched the mugs on the table and filled them with fresh coffee for himself and Peter.

"Why are you here, Stacey?"

"I wanted to see how the family reunion was going," Stacey replied.

There was a weighted pause, and Lowell barely caught back the mug he'd handed to Peter, as Peter let go of it in surprise.

"What family reunion?"

Stacey grinned in a way that was more a baring of teeth. "I guess I'm a little early. Your brother will be here soon, though, I'm sure. Funny, Pete, that you never fucking told me you have a family of werewolves. But, they hate you too, don't they? Afraid jailbait will hate you too? He should."

"Shut up," Lowell snarled, hating the pain he could see in Peter's stance, his face, the way he'd gone so white. "I could never hate him."

"Ask him why that bite I gave him isn't a problem," Stacey said, snarling the words right back. "Ask him, then tell me if you could never hate him."

Lowell threw his coffee at Stacey, then himself, picking Stacey up and throwing him toward the back door. "Get out. Stay out. Come back and I will kill you."

He stood shaking as the door closed behind Stacey, feeling like he was two different people, one of them a total stranger.

"Low..."

The gentle touch to his shoulder had him turning around, going easily into the arms that pulled him close, allowing himself to be soothed by the feel and smell of Peter, who said they were mates, and he didn't wholly understand it but for now just knowing was enough.

## Part Three: Waning Moon

Lowell made his way steadily back home, eagerly following the scent of his mate.

His territory was secured; no interlopers would enter it lightly. All signs of the recent intruder had been abolished. Mate and home were safe again.

Moon was high and bright in the sky, calling, loving. As he cleared the forest and crossed the creek, he paused at the base of the hill. Throwing his head back, he howled long and loud at Moon, expressing love and thanks and admiration.

As the howls slowly faded away into silence, he made his way swiftly up the hill to the porch.

His claws clicked on the porch as he lazily crossed it to where his mate sat against the railing, legs stretched out. Reaching his mate, Lowell pushed and rubbed and nuzzled. He chuffed as the affection was returned, hands petting and stroking and caressing. Giving one last nuzzle, he finally draped himself over his mate's legs, eyes closing as he relaxed. Moon and mate, home secured...

Rumbling softly, he allowed himself to slip into a light doze, just able to feel the hands that still petted and caressed.

The chirping of birds woke him, along with the feel of a breeze across his skin.

Lowell sat up with a start, overwhelmed by so many scents he did and did not recognize.

Peter was the most overwhelming of all. The window across the room was open, letting in the sounds and scents of outside. A trace of citrus, the faintest hint of the alcohol Peter had been drinking the other day.

His eyes widened as comprehension dawned. What was he doing in Peter's bedroom? 'Werewolf Dies of Mortification.'

He looked around despite himself, absorbing all he could of this piece of Peter he'd never seen before. The carpet was dark green, the furniture a warm, gold wood. There was a dresser, two nightstands, a large chest at the foot of the massive bed. To his left, on the same wall against which the bed was pushed, was the open window. Against the far left wall was a door that likely led to the bathroom. At the far end of the wall opposite the bed was the door to the hall.

On the walls...pictures...

Lowell pushed back the dark green coverlet and slowly climbed from bed. He paused briefly to admire that he was dressed in his usual sleep pants, and carefully did not think about the fact that he would have been naked when he changed back.

He moved to the nearest collage of pictures, at least two dozen of them neatly arranged. A man with gray-flecked hair who looked like Peter plus several years. A woman with dark, curly hair and a smile exactly like Peter's.

The couple stood with their hands resting on the shoulders of two young men - Peter was immediately recognizable, and Lowell could not tear his eyes away from the image of a Peter who could not be more than ten or so.

Finally he dragged his eyes away to look at the other boy. Two or three years older? He looked more like the mother, right up to the dark, curly hair.

Other pictures in the group showed them as wolves. Sharp. Dark brown-red fur, and they looked so happy all heaped together...and Peter sitting in the midst of them, smiling in his soft way. Lowell wondered if anyone else had ever thought he looked sort of sad, even as he rested his hands on the wolves lying around him.

Moving away from the collage, he examined next a picture of Peter and his brother. They were handsome children, about the same age as in the other pictures.

He moved to another one...this one a shot of three kids playing in the creek, wet and messy and happy. Peter, his brother, and a girl that looked like them except that her hair was a pale blonde.

So this was Peter's family? The werewolves that used to live here? Why had they left? More important, why hadn't Peter gone with them?

Wandering the room, he studied and memorized every picture available.

He jumped when the door opened, stumbling into the dresser, scrambling to catch the little box that nearly fell off when he knocked it. 'Werewolf Opposite of Sauve.'

"You're awake," Peter said with a smile. He was wearing his lab coat, and smelled like lavender and peppermint - so Ms. Holly had come around again.

"I, uh, I'm sorry. Why am I here? Is everything okay? Sorry, I was uh, looking at the, um, pictures."

Peter laughed softly, and pushed at his glasses. "You wouldn't leave my side last night. I went to bed and you hopped right up beside me."

"Oh," Lowell said faintly. 'Werewolf Dies of Embarrassment.' "Uh, sorry?"

Peter smiled. "There's coffee, if you like." He rolled his eyes. "My second pot this morning, I swear one day this town really will be sick and I won't believe them."

Lowell choked on a laugh. "That will teach them to cry wolf?"

"I cannot believe I just set myself up for that," Peter said with a groan. "I'm going downstairs before I get myself in further trouble." He looked at Lowell, then turned away, closing the door behind him.

Um.

'Wolf Forgets How to Breathe.'

He'd seen people look like that before but, uh, never at him.

Swallowing, Lowell moved to the door and made certain the hallway was clear, then bolted for his room.

An hour later, showered and dressed, he almost felt normal enough to go downstairs without doing something stupid.

No one was in the kitchen, but a cup of coffee waited for him. Smiling, he picked it up and wandered toward the clinic, sipping carefully.

Three women were in the clinic, one of them not entirely human, and to judge from the smell none of them would mind if Peter suggested a very thorough, very private physical. He growled softly to himself, but felt no real threat.

Not when he was still trying very hard not to think about that Look Peter had given him. Part of him wondered if someone had been standing behind him. Another part of him was excited and anticipating...but neither part knew what, precisely, he was anticipating.

Oh, he wasn't wholly ignorant. He wondered now if his being this alpha thing was the reason no one had ever actually propositioned him, unkempt appearance and smell notwithstanding.



Pushing open the door that connected house to clinic, Lowell took another sip of coffee and watched the proceedings.

The women he'd smelled were clustered around Peter, talking roughly ninety miles an hour - with hand gestures to match. Lowell caught snippets of what seemed to be six different conversations at once, stuff about volleyball and bakesales and knitting and a store on fire, something about a ghost...

But his eyes were only for the beleaguered doctor - his doctor, though he still had trouble believing his own thoughts.

Peter looked up and smiled at him, pushing absently at his glasses.

Abruptly the conversation ceased, and as one the three women turned around.

He may be an alpha, but he didn't think even one of those was any match for Women In Search of Fresh Gossip.

"Aren't you a cutie," one cooed, reaching up to pat Lowell's cheek. The others made equally horrifying noises around her, and Lowell fought an urge to turn and run.

"Ladies," Peter said patiently, moving around them to lightly settle an arm around Lowell's waist.

Suddenly Lowell ceased to care one bit about the busybodies assaulting him. He was aware only of that arm, the warmth of his mate - wow was that a heady thought, and he was slowly getting used to thinking it - and of the look Peter had given him not so long ago.

Were they maybe moving too fast? Was any of this real?

Of course, they were ignoring the problems that had not gone away with Stacey...but Lowell was more than content to ignore them for now.

"He's just woken up, let's not overwhelm him, shall we?" Peter said with a laugh. "What health problems did you say you were having?" He asked.

The ladies laughed amongst themselves. "I think we've been cured. Your beau is very handsome, Doctor."

"Thank you," Peter said with a smile. "Now go and report to your mistress, since she didn't get anything out of me this morning."

Cackling, the ladies swiftly obeyed, door slamming shut behind them in their hurry to leave.

Lowell stared after them, coffee mostly forgotten in his hands. "You're, uh, going to be busy today."

"Probably," Peter said, mouth quirked. Then the happy expression abruptly died. "Hopefully in pleasant ways."

"Stacey," Lowell said, his own levity fading.

"Yes," Peter said with a sigh.

Lowell bit his lip, wanting to know but hating to bring up something that obviously caused Peter so much pain - yet now that he was awake, and dressed, and had caffeine in his system...last night had been the full moon. Peter had been bitten before that.

By all rights, he should have turned into a wolf. Why hadn't he?

That wasn't the only question he had surrounding Peter. What about all those pictures upstairs? Where was Peter's family? Why had they left? Why was Peter still here, and so painfully alone?

Did it really matter?

Lowell shook his head. No, it didn't, except that he wanted to know everything about Peter. He wanted to understand this man who somehow, somehow, apparently belonged to him...

The thought made his mouth dry. Mate. What, uh, exactly did that mean?

"You look as though your thoughts are giving you quite the headache," Peter said softly.

"They are," Lowell said, shaking his head again, taking a sip of coffee to hide his embarrassment. "I don't know where to start."

Peter moved away to lean against a desk that was cluttered with paperwork and files. He pulled off his glasses and set them aside on top of the papers. "I am surprised you do not start with me."

Lowell shrugged. "It makes you unhappy. Dealing with *me* is enough for now." He grimaced. "I don't get why I'm this alpha thing. I'm not...bossy or anything."

"You'll grow into it," Peter said. "That your instinct is to command, to take charge, says that loud and clear. It suits you, or will, once you get comfortable with the idea."

"I'm never going to get comfortable with it," Lowell muttered, drinking more of his coffee. He shied away from thinking of how he'd ordered Stacey to get a glass, the way he'd thrown him out with a promise to kill.

He didn't threaten people. Ever.

"A wise leader," Peter said softly, "knows when to use his authority, and when not. That you never forced the issue says that you have always known your power, if only on a subconscious level. Perhaps you feared abusing your power - because more than merely werewolves will listen if you give an order and compel the listener to obey."

Lowell blinked at that, and went to drink more coffee, only to realize he'd emptied his mug. Drat. He thought about excusing himself to get more, but realized it was just a feeble attempt at running away.

What he really wanted was the nerve to ask about the whole mate thing. Cause it was pretty obvious what all that meant, especially when his stupid wolf form insisted on sleeping in Peter's bed - his cheeks burned just thinking about it - but oh man did he feel like the loser he was when he thought about it.

Ugh.

Peter smiled at him, that easy, gentle way he had that just made everything so much better. When he held out a hand, Lowell could not resist and went toward it, settling his own, Peter's hand soft and warm.

"Your thoughts are plain upon your face, Low," he said with another soft laugh.

"Oh," Lowell said, feeling stupid. "I, uh, am sorry for being such an idiot."

Peter squeezed his hand and tugged him closer still, and Lowell barely noticed when his coffee mug was taken and set aside. "You're not an idiot. Nothing more than overwhelmed. The past few days have been a little much. Most people would have gone insane, I think."

"I, uh, don't see how, um, all this...uh..." He shook his head, wishing his cheeks would cool down cause he felt dumb enough. "I don't see how it's possible."

Or why Peter would want someone like him. He was older, and his former lovers - Lowell ignored the angry jealousy that flared up - had probably all been his age and handsome and experienced and definitely not dumb homeless kids who didn't understand how to be what they were.

"To be honest, I wonder that myself," Peter replied.

Oh. Lowell told himself he shouldn't feel dejected. Of course Peter would wonder why he was apparently mate to a dumb homeless kid.

"A purebred alpha could do far better for a mate than a small town doctor with mediocre alchemical abilities," Peter continued. He reached up with both hands to lightly cup Lowell's face, tilting it up, thumbs brushing his cheeks "Once you are fully come into your power, and comfortable with it, you will be quite the unstoppable force. Whatever you want, Low, you could very likely have."

Lowell tried to focus on speaking, but awareness of Peter filled his senses - the smell of him, the way their scents combined, the gentle stroking of fingers across his face, the pretty eyes free of the shielding spectacles.

"Um...uh...I've been all over," he finally managed. "Maybe it takes me being eighteen for this alpha thing to kick in...but if I'd seen something I wanted, surely I would have stuck with it? I don't know, I'm just a stupid kid way in over his head."

Peter smiled. "Hardly. Anyway, at the moment I'm rather cheating."

"Uh..." Lowell swallowed again. "That's okay. I, uh, kind of, um, like the cheating."

"Oh?" Peter asked softly.

"Y-yeah," Lowell replied, voice just as soft, and he thought he might have moved first but it was hard to tell for certain and then he stopped caring.

He didn't know how kisses were supposed to be, but he rather thought this was a good one - well, Peter was good. Lowell copied the motions, making a sound that might have been a whimper, unconsciously pressing closer, hands flexing uncertainly even as he tamped down on the part of him that wanted to push Peter down.

Then hands latched onto his arms and guided, until he wrapped his arms around Peter's neck, felt Peter's slide around his own waist, and the kiss paused briefly before turning into another, and another after that, until Lowell thought he was rather starting to get the hang of it.

Peter's hands smoothed lightly up and down his back, just barely touching skin where Lowell's t-shirt was slightly bunched up. Lowell shivered, and kissed harder, digging his own fingers into Peter's so-soft hair

He jumped when the phone abruptly rang, jerking back, eyes wide. The phone rang again, the sharp sound loud and near-painful after the near-perfect silence. Lowell licked his lips and cleared his throat, watching as Peter glared at the phone beside him and snatched it from the cradle.

"What?" Peter snapped. He frowned. "Are you sure? Damn it." He sighed and fumbled for his glasses as he hung up the phone, shoving them back on his face.

Lowell tamped down on his disappointment that there would be no more kisses. "What's wrong?"

"That was Jordan," Peter replied. "Apparently Sally put the town on alert. Jordan just called to say that someone saw Stacey and two other men driving through town - headed this way."

"I see," Lowell said, rage beginning to simmer. He had told Stacey not to come back, and he very much intended to kill the bastard this time.

No one was going to hurt his mate. He would not permit it.

That forced him to consider the questions he had been avoiding so far. "Why does he hate you so much? Because the experiments didn't work? Is that all?"

"I think you can guess the other reason," Peter said quietly, resting a hand on his arm, right over the wound that Lowell knew was there beneath the white lab coat.

He licked his lips, tasting Peter on them, and it was enough to steady him. "You don't turn into a wolf. Why?"

Peter laughed, though to Lowell's ears it sounded more like he was crying. "I don't know. I never have. They never forgave me for it, and they probably never will. I didn't know, it wasn't my fault...but they blame me all the same." He looked up, smile so sad it hurt, eyes dark with pain as he looked pleadingly at Lowell. "I am a werewolf...or should be...but..." He drifted off, turning away.

Fear. Lowell could smell the fear on him as plainly as he'd been able to smell the lust only minutes ago. He hated it. His mate should not smell so, not where he was concerned. Peter was his, and had nothing to fear from him. "But what?"

Drawing a shaky breath, Peter continued. "I'm immune to silver. For some reason, that immunity blocks the werewolf in me. I have improved senses, though not as good as those of a true werewolf. My adoration for the moon is the same... I can't change, that's all." He laughed bitterly, voice full of self loathing as he held tightly to his wound and stared at the floor, hair falling in his face. "I'm everything you and every other werewolf wants to be, probably much like humans wanted to be when they first began experimenting on werewolves. By sheer dumb luck, and I can't figure out how to recreate it, how to copy what I am to share with other werewolves...and so they all hate me for it, when they realize what's wrong with me."

Oh. Jeez. Uh.

"How, uh, is that possible?"

"I don't know," Peter said quietly, pushing at his glasses, eyes still on the floor. "I've tried to figure it out most of my life, from the moment I realized that I was the true freak. Everything a werewolf wants is in me, and I can't figure it out."

He slowly looked up, and Lowell couldn't bear it. Moving forward, he threw his arms around Peter and held him tight.

Not so long ago, only a few days really, he would have been insanely jealous and bitter. He knew it. Peter had the right of it - he was exactly what Lowell had always wanted to be. A werewolf that didn't have to fear changing. He was, in every way that counted, normal.

Now, though...Lowell tried to figure out when he'd stopped caring about being a werewolf. Maybe the point he realized he wasn't alone.

"It's okay," he said quietly.

Peter was stiff in his arms, then suddenly just...melted. Lowell held all the tighter, breathing in the way their scents mingled, still tasting a hint of Peter on his tongue. Peter held him just as tightly, trembling slightly.

Lowell could understand. Until Peter, he'd been a freak too.

Soft, warm lips brushed against his throat, and suddenly it was his turn to shiver. "Peter..."

"I think," Peter said softly, pulling away to look at him, "that perhaps we are even more well-suited than either of us realized. You...truly do not hate me for being what you cannot?"

Lowell stared at him. "You don't hate me. How could I hate you? Uh, and it's, um, sort of hard to be mad about being someone who can, um, apparently give orders that people can't refuse. 'Werewolf Rules World' like, yeah?" He flushed as he realized he'd just spoken one of his dumb headline things aloud.

Peter laughed, then dipped his head and brushed a soft kiss across Lowell's lips.

It didn't stay soft long, and Lowell pressed closer, held tighter - then broke away with a frustrated, angry snarl as unwelcome scents caught his attention. He squeezed Peter's shoulders, then tore away to bolt across the room and throw himself outside.

A fancy-looking, dark blue car pulled into Peter's driveway.

He wished it were evening, because the drinkers would make good backup - but the werewolves probably knew that, and had chosen the daylight for a reason.

Well, it didn't matter. He didn't need drinkers to take care of a bunch of foolish, disobedient mongrels. They would obey or die, that was the law of Moon.

Growling softly, skin prickling as he tensed to change should it be necessary, Lowell stalked across the yard as the werewolves climbed out of the car.

He recognized Stacey immediately, but ignored him for the time being. That one knew he was as good as dead, let him wait for it. No, he was more interested in the two that smelled like his mate and yet not.

The taller of the two had a mop of curly dark hair, and eyes exactly like Peter's, though his looks were rather more on the pretty side than Peter's quiet handsomeness. The second one looked a lot like Peter, except his hair was pale blonde, eyes dark brown. Lowell recalled him from a few of the pictures, and always the little boy was with a little girl of the same hair and eyes. There had also been a picture of the brothers with her, playing in the creek.

"You are not welcome here," he said, "if you have only come to cause harm. Leave." He said the words softly, without much force - but that would change if they proved to be problematic, as they likely would.

The one that could only be Peter's brother stepped forward. "You're the jailbait Stacey mentioned."

"My name is Lowell, and you will use it," Lowell said, this time putting true command behind the words, forcing them to obey him.

All three werewolves looked at him in surprise.

"Tell me your names," Lowell ordered. "You are Peter's brother...and you must be a cousin or something."

"That's right," said the brother. "My name is Connor. This is Antonio...the sister of Anita, for whose death Peter is responsible."

Lowell growled. "Why would you say something like that?"

"Because it's true," Antonio snapped. "Now we hear from Stacey that he is playing around with cures and such. That freak - can he not leave well enough alone? How many more wolves is he going to hurt?"

"It was an accident," Peter said from behind Lowell.

"I remember it," Connor snapped. "You shoved her so the wolf wouldn't bite you."

"Stop it!" Lowell bellowed. He pointed at the three werewolves. "Do not speak. Do not move. Do nothing until I give you leave."

They glared at him, all but vibrating with fury - but they did not defy him.

Lowell trembled, both with the realization that he really did have such authority - and that he apparently had no qualms about using it. He turned to Peter. "What is going on here? Why do they hate you? Why...why are you alone, Peter?"

"You were looking at my pictures," Peter said with a sad sigh. "Do you remember the little girl in many of them?"

"Yes."

Peter pushed at his glasses. "Her name was Anita," he said softly. "She was my cousin, and probably we all were half in love with her. A sweeter girl was never born, and she likely would have become a fine woman. Like me, she was born human, though the rest of our families are werewolves. Unlike me, she was completely human...and back then, everyone thought me the same..."

He sighed softly. "Many werewolf parents, when they give birth to a human child, bite it so that it will fit in with the rest of the family. My parents, as well Anita's, saw no reason to do that - mostly because it is always a gamble. There is no guarantee the change will take well. So we grew up the only humans..."

Silence fell, and Lowell moved closer, reaching out to hold fast to Peter's hand.

That got him a weak smile, and Peter resumed speaking, the words coming slowly. "One night we were playing; it was summer, we always stayed out late then. A full moon night, and Anita and I loved to play with our siblings in wolf form. But that night...a...strange wolf...came out of nowhere. He was...not right..."

Peter was lying. Lowell knew it immediately. Something in what he said was not true, but the look in Peter's eyes gave him pause. He let Peter keep speaking.

"The wolf came after us," Peter said quietly. "We couldn't find our siblings or parents, so we started running for my house. I guess Connor showed up at some point in there, because he saw what happened next...sort of..."

He looked toward his brother, who glared hatefully back - but did not speak.

"I tripped," Peter said. "A branch, a root, I don't know what it was, but I tripped on it and groped blindly for balance - accidentally grabbing Anita. The wolf lunged then, and wound up biting her."

"Instead of you!" Connor suddenly snarled. "You didn't trip. You grabbed her and threw her in the wolf's path so you could get away."

Lowell spun around and snarled. "I said be silent, mongrel, unless you want to feel the full force of my anger."

Connor stared at him, eyes wide. "What are you?"

"He's purebred," Peter said quietly. "A purebred alpha."

"How can someone that small be an alpha?"

"How can something so big and pretty be so stupid?" Lowell retorted. "Be quiet."

Connor snapped his mouth shut and stood silent.

Lowell growled a low approval and turned back to Peter. "So what happened?"

"She was infected by the bite," Peter said tiredly. "She didn't take well to it, not at all. In theory, she should have...but for reasons unknown it was simply too much for her. At the next full moon, she turned into a wolf and went completely crazy. She badly wounded both my mother and me..."

Peter's face contorted with pain. "My mother died...and I took a long time to heal...and when the next full moon came around, I did not change." He stared at the ground. "No one could ever forgive me that." He looked at his brother, who stared hatefully back. Turning away, Peter stared off into the woods, voice barely audible as he resumed speaking. "My father couldn't bear to live without my mother...he wasted away after a few months. My uncle and aunt could not stand to be here anymore, and they hated the sight of me. So too my cousin and big brother. Six months after Anita was bitten, everyone but me moved away, and since then no werewolves have lived in Midsummer."

"You're trying to find a cure so there are no more Anita's," Lowell said.

"Yes," Peter said softly.

"Liar," Stacey said hatefully. "You torture werewolves and make empty promises about cures because you want to be a werewolf yourself."

Peter flinched, and did not say anything.

"So what?" Lowell asked. He refused to be nervous, refused to be his stupid timid self. No. His mate needed him, that was all that mattered. He knew what it was like to be hated and feared, he wouldn't permit these foolish wolves to treat his mate that way. Not in his territory. "Most werewolves want to be human. Why do you hate a human for wanting to be a werewolf, when all the people he loves are werewolves and he is not? You hold his humanity against him, yet also hate him for wanting to fit in?"

"He's the reason my sister is dead," Antonio snarled. "He let her get bitten, when if he had taken the bite all would have been fine."

Lowell glared at him. "No one knew that at the time."

"Yet if he wanted so badly to be a wolf," Connor broke in coldly, "why not let the wolf bite him?"

"We were children," Peter said, voice full of pain. "It was an accident. We were scared and running in the dark, Connor. I tripped. That was all. Anita never hated me for it, so why do you? Why...why was she so willing to forgive me, and the rest of you were only willing to hate me?"

He closed his eyes, reaching up to pinch the space between them, the gesture pushing his glasses up. "Everyone but mother and Anita hated me after that, and it was just a fucking accident."

Lowell ached to hold him close, to banish Peter's pain in whatever way he could.

Instead he forced himself to focus. He was an alpha, that meant he had to do something to fix all this, right?

"Why are you here?" he asked. "If you're only here to cause more pain, or because you listened to <i>him</i>, then leave." He looked at Stacey. "You are fortunate you are not already dead. Peter keeps me from doing it, because it would make him unhappy were I to kill you, but I was not bluffing when I said I would. Do you understand me, wolf?"

"Yes," Stacey snarled, and Lowell was gratified to see that he did in fact seem a bit pale.

Lowell turned to Connor. "Tell me why you are here."

"Because he's hurting other wolves, making empty promises of cures."

"No," Lowell said. "He never said anything except that he was trying to make a cure. The wolves who helped him grew impatient and angry and left. That one," he pointed to Stacey, "was also his lover, though he did not deserve to be, and broke it off because Peter did not develop the cure as quickly as Stacey though he should. So Stacey went around telling every werewolf he saw that Peter had a cure. Stacey is the liar, not Peter."

Connor was silent.

Antonio stirred. "He has no fucking right to meddle. Everything would have been better if he'd been the one bitten that night. It's his fault my sister is dead, and now he's making more suffer." He glared hatefully at Peter. "Why did you have to be a freak? Why is she dead while you're still alive?"

Peter said nothing, merely continued to stare miserably at the ground.

"Why are you such jerks?" Lowell demanded. "You're family. You were all a bunch of kids. I don't understand it." He balled his hands into fists. "All my life I've been homeless, unwanted, a fucking freak no matter how hard I tried to work or how



nice I tried to be. No one wanted me, no one would give me a chance. I knew nothing about my own damned Lycanthropy until I came here." At least he'd finally remembered the stupid word. "I didn't know werewolves could have real families and stuff. Yet the first family I learn about....and you're all torn apart because of stupidity and childhood and mistakes."

He licked his lips, refusing to be nervous, not when Peter hurt so badly. "You should understand better than anyone about being a freak, about not being able to control everything...yet you hurt the person who most needs you, who always loved you...and still does. He has the pictures in his room, he never forgot any of you, and here you come to be total assholes. I've been beaten up by cops who are nicer than you three."

Connor and Antonio remained unmoved, and beside them Stacey was looking entirely too smug.

"Fine," Lowell said quietly. "If you will not listen to reason, then you will learn the hard way."

He licked his lips again, and wondered who it was speaking - surely not him. Had he ever talked this much in his entire life? When had he gotten so damned bossy and stuff? 'Werewolf Suffers From Split Personalities; At Least Three Have Introduced Themselves.'

Swallowing, hands still fisted at his side, he turned to Peter. Oh, he really fucking hated himself for this. He couldn't ignore his instincts however, not when he was this riled - and it was more than a little disconcerting that more and more he was getting comfortable with his instincts, with...being an alpha, he guessed. 'Wolf Goes To Bed Wuss, Wakes up Badass; Experts Mystified.'

"Peter," he said quietly. "Tell the truth."

"No," Peter said, eyes dark and pleading behind the glasses. "I promised. Please, Low..."

Lowell shook his head, feeling awful but he would not back down, no matter how much he loved his mate. "I'm ordering you to tell the truth. I know you were lying about what happened that night."

"Oh, please," Antonio said.

"Be quiet," Lowell bellowed, turning around. "I grow tired of your defiance, mongrel. Disobey me one more time and I will rip your tongue out. Do you understand me?"

"Y-yeah," Antonio stuttered, clearly taken aback.

Lowell growled. "I said, do you understand me?"

Antonio swallowed, then slowly nodded. "Yes."

"Yes, what?" Lowell asked softly, but coldly.

"Yes, master," Antonio said.

Growling again, he turned back to Peter, reaching up to snag the front of his shirt, yanking him close, tugging him down to kiss Peter hard, wishing he were better at it - but it was enough. "Tell the truth," he repeated.

Peter nodded, looking sick. "It...it wasn't a strange wolf that attacked us." He spoke haltingly, as though it were difficult to say each word. "We were playing in a favorite field, waiting for Toni and Connor to show up. We saw Toni, finally, and ran toward him..."

He looked away, making a rough sound. "Something was wrong with him. He growled at us, but in a mean way, not his usual playful way... We got scared and started running. He chased us..."

"What?" Antonio demanded - then fell silent at a look from Lowell.

Peter kept talking, the words coming faster now, as if suddenly he could not stop, like water from a broken dam. "I tripped, he wound up biting Anita...then Connor showed up, and he was acting funny too, though not as badly as Toni... My mother found us shortly thereafter. After everyone was in bed, I sat in the living room unable to sleep. She asked me what happened, and told me that she'd smelled wolfsbane on Toni and Connor. Especially on Toni. She said it was what made them go crazy, made Toni so scary and violent...and that likely neither of them would remember much, if anything, come morning."

He made a sound like a choked-off sob. "The next day, she went off to find the wolfsbane and destroy it. She made me promise not to tell anyone, explaining that there was likely going to be enough pain for everyone without telling them about

the wolfsbane. It was an accident, she said, and children shouldn't be punished for accidents."

As his words faded away, Peter reached up to press at his eyes, again shoving up his glasses, and this time Lowell could see he was fighting tears.

Still holding fast to Peter with one hand, he turned back to the silent, pale-faced werewolves.

"Would you like to speak now?" he asked quietly.

"That can't be," Antonio said, shouting the words, voice shaky. "I would never hurt my little sister. He's a liar!"

"No," Lowell said sharply. "He speaks the truth, I know he does and you know I do not lie. Tell me that you realize this, mongrels. Now!"

"You're speaking the truth," Connor said, a choking sound to the words, his own eyes as dark now as Peter's had been throughout the conversation. He looked at his brother. "Oh, god, you're telling the truth."

Antonio sank to the ground, holding himself tight, looking ill and close to tears. "I killed my own sister...oh my god...I killed my own sister...it's my fault everything went to hell." He began to sob, burying his face in his hands.

Connor moved toward him and knelt, resting a hand on Antonio's shoulder - catching the hand that tried to shove him away, yanking Antonio close. "It was wolfsbane, Toni...not..." He stared hard at the ground, holding Antonio tightly, then slowly looked up at his brother. "It was an accident."

Peter nodded, then turned away and strode into the house.

Lowell looked at Connor. "Leave, all three of you. Come back when you are willing to act like pack." He looked at Stacey. "You are not welcome here. If I or the drinker ever sense your presence, you will be killed. Is that understood?"

Stacey nodded, and fumbled for his car keys, struggling to get in the car without tearing his eyes from Lowell.

He watched in silence as all three of them slowly got into the car, refusing to feel or say or do anything until they were well out of sight and the only scent of them was the lingering traces that would fade in time.

Then he bolted for the house, racing up the stairs and into Peter's bedroom. Peter lay on his back on the bed, an arm thrown over his face.

Lowell sat down on the edge of the bed, feeling sick and guilty and worried and <i>hurting</i> that Peter was in so much pain and he was the reason. "I'm sorry," he said quietly. Because he was sorry for causing Peter pain - but he wasn't sorry he'd forced the truth.

"I promised her I wouldn't tell," Peter said, slowly dragging his arm away, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand. "I promised her that night, and again later when she was dying. She didn't want things to be worse."

He couldn't stand it. Moving on instinct, on the need to comfort, Lowell lay down alongside Peter and held him close. "It wasn't fair of her to make you promise," he said. "You were just a kid, yeah? You were all kids."

"But he shouldn't have to live with the fact he bit her," Peter said quietly.

"No," Lowell said, growling the words. "A good wolf accepts responsibility for his actions. He bit her, that was his mistake to bear - but it was her choice to endure or not. She was a weak wolf, and that is no one's fault but hers."

"Maybe..." Peter said, clearly unconvinced.

Lowell held him tight. What could he say? He knew things, and yet did not know them. Instinct only carried him so far. He was a wolf, but also a stupid homeless kid who didn't know anything.

Things should have gone differently all those years ago...but they hadn't. It wasn't fair that Peter be the only one to suffer, when he was apparently the one least responsible for anything.

"Are you mad at me?" he asked quietly.

Peter sighed softly. "I want to be...but...I was tired of holding the secret in...I just hate to see anyone in pain..."

"You shouldn't be in pain either," Lowell said. "Maybe everything will start to get better now."

"I hope so," Peter replied. "I-I just want my family back. Our parents are dead, but I know my aunt and uncle...and my brother...Toni...we used to be so close and they all hated me after that and I promised my mother-"

Lowell kissed him, heart beating fiercely in his chest. Beneath his hands, braced on Peter's chest, he could feel Peter's heart beating just as fast. His mouth was warm and willing, though, a desperate edge to the kiss.

One kiss turned into another, and gradually they shifted in tone from simple comfort to genuine heat. When at last they broke apart, Lowell felt hot and almost dizzy - and more than a little relieved that the light was back in Peter's eyes.

"A pity the circumstances were so grim," Peter said, familiar smile curving his mouth. "You are more than a little distracting when you are acting all alpha, Low."

Lowell flushed. "Uh, that's good, 'cause, um, I seem to, uh, like doing it?"

Peter laughed softly, hands moving to wrap around Lowell's waist, and Lowell about expired on the spot as he was pulled from lying alongside to Peter to fully atop him. He shifted, straddling Peter's legs, arms falling to rest awkwardly on either side of Peter's head. "How was I lucky enough to get you?" Peter asked.

"You, um, saved a drowning wolf from the rain?" Lowell answered. "I think I'm the lucky one, really." He licked his lips. "Maybe we're, um, really good for each other? Cause you know everything and I know nothing...and I'm good at making jerks go away and leave you alone, yeah?"

"Yeah," Peter said, the words little more than a whisper, his smile gentle and fond, arms a pleasant weight.

Lowell smiled back, and leaned down to kiss him again, barely able to believe everything was real and likely to stay that way. 'Werewolf Finds Happiness, World Cheers.'

## DRABBLES

Low wondered if making out could be counted as a hobby.

He rumbled softly as they shifted on the couch, Peter beneath him, warm and pliant. The kisses, slow and lazy, were flavored of hazelnut coffee and cream.

Fingers pushed and nudged, and Low made low, indistinct noises of approval as fingers slid lazily along his skin, sinking his own into Peter's hair, trailing his freed hand along whatever of Peter he could reach.

It had, so far, been a quiet night. Sally had gone into town, Jordan dragged along after heavy protesting, and no patients had yet stopped by. Lowell rather hoped the town stayed healthy tonight.

He settled his weight a bit more firmly, growling low at the satisfaction brought by being pressed so close to his mate.

That he was allowed to do this, that Peter wanted it just as badly, was still heady and strange - but he would like to meet the man who would refuse such an offer.

Peter's hands grew slightly bolder, making Lowell shiver and want to tease in his turn, shyness banked by instinct and desire. Still, the heat didn't flare entirely out of control. Except for the first couple of nights, it seemed they were always stealing hasty moments, or forced to seek privacy in the forest.

The pitfalls, he supposed, of being mated to a doctor perpetually on call for a nosy small town.

So, slow and lazy and easy. They could do hot and heavy soon. For now, this was nice.

Peter broke the long string of kisses to nuzzle at his throat.

Lowell shivered, then shifted them enough that Peter was laid flat out on the couch.

"Feeling well, Low?" Peter asked with a smile. "You look a bit flushed." He tugged Lowell down and kissed him before Lowell could formulate a reply. He was panting as they broke apart. "I could recommend some treatment."

"You and your jokes," Lowell replied, shaking his head.

"They make you smile, don't deny it," Peter replied, and then they were back to kissing, touching lightly, though this time it was Lowell who managed to get his hands beneath Peter's shirt and sometime soon it would be coming off but still it was nice not to be-

A familiar chime rang out. Lowell groaned.

Peter heaved a sigh. "Whoever it is, he had better be sick or I will be sorely tempted to see that he leaves here less than healthy."

Lowell growled low in agreement, and went easily when Peter tugged him down for another kiss. As the chime came again, signaling the arrival of someone in the clinic, he finally broke the kiss and forced himself to get off the couch and Peter.

Holding out a hand, he helped Peter to his feet, resisting the urge to take another kiss because then whoever it was would likely be waiting a long time.

"Hold that thought," Peter said with a wink. "I'll be back soon."

Lowell smiled, knowing his cheeks must be red but not caring, and settled back down on the couch as Peter vanished to attend his patient. Reaching down, he snatched up the book he'd dropped when Peter had shown up earlier and relaxed.

He'd much rather make out, but there were definitely way worse things in life than stretching out on a couch that smelled like his mate, with a good book and a promise of more making out in the near future.

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