

LYKOS

THIRD AGE

Chapter 9

(Knife's Edge)

Steady footsteps crunched through the firm surface layer of the snow into the lighter powder beneath. To Udo, it almost seemed like walking on eggshells. It was fascinating how falling snow had the power to muffle some sounds while making one's presence far easier to detect. He'd made the three-block journey from campus to the grocery store, picking up more supplies. It had taken long enough that only the faintest hint of light tinged the horizon, obscured by the indistinct haze of snowflakes. Udo shifted the weight of the reusable grocery bag before setting off across the crosswalk. Even with his enhanced strength, carrying them over such a distance took its toll.

The greenery along the western perimeter of the university's campus had been carefully cultivated to create the perfect noise barrier. Tree branches arched down to rest just a few inches above the top of the perfectly edged shrubs, forming a wall with a narrow margin of view at eye level of the street. Udo had heard people talk about the campus bubble, but as Udo trudged along the obstacle, it was hard not to take it literally.

After passing half of the fraternity buildings, Udo finally reached the almost imperceptible gap in the shrubs that led into campus. He slipped through, relying on his enhanced vision to see where he was going in the darkness. The fraternity buildings seemed a little older and a little more run down than the other dormitories. Udo half wondered to himself if it was because they were built first or because they were self-managed. Still, the thought slipped away from Udo as he turned yet another corner and stepped onto the far cleaner, wider, well maintained cement path that bisected the courtyard between Keller and Hawkstray halls.

Udo had made it about a third of the way down the path when something hit him. His eyes glinted amber, his ear tips started to creep into points. The hair on the back of his neck stood up on end and more hair started to sprout. Even the fingernails digging into the grocery bag started to grow sharp points. The response had been automatic, instinctive, and it took another moment for Udo to catch up. As he sniffed the air, the cause for his alarm became apparent - he smelled blood.

The tart, tangy aroma of iron and plasma was unmistakable. Udo had already smelled too much blood in his life. He sniffed again, eyes scanning back and forth across the courtyard. The space was far darker than usual owing to the fact that most of the student body was still on winter vacation. It was only the new students and those that would be helping with orientation. As a result, most of the dorms were dark and the normally warm lights flooding out of the Hawk's Nest were absent as well. Udo willed himself to let his eyes shift, the irises shifting from blue to gold and then amber. He inhaled again, trying to discern more about the blood... It wasn't splattered, and the smell was... diminishing?

Udo cautiously advanced, lighter on his feet than he had been before. His shoulders were slightly hunched, his heart racing, pumping his own blood to every muscle to prepare it for whatever was coming. Udo had made it two thirds down the path, nearly all the way to where

the four-way intersection that connected the two dorms, the street and the deeper part of campus.

“Are you one of those guard dogs that barks at every leaf?” A wry voice asked. Udo turned, involuntarily revealing his fangs had gotten a bit longer in his mouth. His amber eyes locked in on a young man reclined on the curved branches of the tree right outside the covered hallway that ran under the outside their dorm. The tree’s uppermost branches had nearly reached the first room Udo had shared with his pack. Something about that made it feel like even more of an invasion of his space.

“Are you hurt?” Udo asked, though the tone in his voice seemed more frustrated than concerned. A reddish-brown eyebrow arched, complementing and contrasting the tawny freckled brown skin the young man had. His reddish-brown hair was dense and curly, taller on top and shaved with a bit of a fade on the sides. A little scruff marked the tip of his chin, though the thick gold cuffs hugging the bottom of his ear lobes were far more distinct. A slow smile crept across his face, revealing very sharp fangs of his own. As he looked at Udo, his brown eyes took on a reddish sheen as he held up an unmarked orange glass bottle, apparently the source of the aroma of blood.

“I am not, but I am guessing that you were smelling my breakfast.” he said before he tipped the bottle back and took a few hearty gulps. Udo realized the smell of blood was diminishing and based on the way the other’s Adam’s apple was bobbing, whatever he was drinking was thick. Udo tried to calm himself and override his natural instincts.

“You’re one of the new students, right?” Udo asked, still trying to make him out in the darkness. Once more the tree dweller raised his bottle in mock toast.

“Dathan Thompson.” he replied, “Are you one of the wardens?” he asked.

“Wa-warden?!” Udo asked in surprise. Once more Dathan cracked a grin.

“Nah, relax man, I’m just messing with you.” he said before jumping out of the tree, although to Udo’s shock, he landed without the thump or the crackle of the snow he landed on. Dathan moved over and stood on his tip toes to peek into Udo’s bag, his face screwing up a little, “Awww man, no meat?” he asked with disappointment.

“You eat meat?” Udo asked before blushing, feeling like a bit of an idiot.

“Hey, a non-growing boy’s gotta eat. Well, I guess I’ll still come. It’s gotta be better than watching the ice machine make ice, right?” Dathan said, “Eight O’clock, right?” Dathan asked. Udo nodded.

“Yeah, University Center building, second floor.” Udo said. Dathan gave a salute with two fingers and was about to head off before he turned around mid-stride and looked back, both eyebrows arching a bit as he looked down at Udo’s footwear. He was wearing thick black boots that almost went up to his knees, laced up the old-fashioned way. Dathan looked at Udo’s black coat and the tighter shirt he wore beneath, then his light, almost platinum blond hair.

“See you around...” Dathan added with a bit of mischievous interest before he sauntered off down the path, heading toward the quad. Udo watched him go for a few paces before he turned and headed for the hallway that would lead around to the front of his dorm. It was going to take a while to get used to everyone.

“We have all had to live with secrets...” Marco said with an earnest, reluctant smile as he looked out at the dozen young men that filled the seats that had been set out, “That’s what makes this moment so exciting and so terrifying.” His words spread out across the empty cafe like space that the university used as a secondary meal hall and occasional event space. All the tables had been folded and pulled into storage, leaving instead a ring of chairs for the dozen students that had opted to participate in the event. Marco looked around at the young men. He’d met a few, seen a few from afar, and others he had just met.

“When I got here about a year and a half ago, there were cheesy ice breaker games and speeches about resources around campus and enough business cards to make a poker deck out of. No one told me that I’d be going to school with werewolves. No one could warn me that a few weeks later, I’d be turning into a werewolf myself.” Marco continued before smiling, “I’ve got the handouts for campus resources, my pack and I have the personal experience to be able to speak to what college life is like... but this is new for all of us. My job here is to help this become a space where you can all be yourselves, getting an education without having to hide who you are.” Marco explained. A long, slender arm shot up from the tallest person in the room.

“Uh, hi? My name is Beck, and I’m a kitsune.” he introduced, reaching to adjust his circular glasses.

“Dude, this isn’t an AA meeting.” Dathan said from where he sat, arms crossed across his stomach, the hood of his black sweatshirt pulled over his hair.

“Yeah, we were anonymous and now we’re not.” Another commented. Marco recognized him as Curtis Martin, his soft, wavy brown hair threatening to fully engulf his face and neck.

“But that’s the point exactly.” Beck said, looking back at the others, “Having to hide who you are is exhausting and depressing and a lot of hard work. I came here to be a part of this experiment. Whether it works or doesn’t work, I don’t care. I’m not going to waste a second hiding anymore. I don’t think any of us should. What’s the point of coming all this way to a place with a spotlight on it just to hide anyway?” he asked. There was quiet in the room for a long moment.

“Well then why not show us what a Kitsune looks like?” Another young man asked, A black tank top hugged well-built muscles, his pale ivory skin contrasted by the long stringy black hair that managed to reach his shoulders. The glint of a gold nose ring hugged one nostril as brownish-red eyes looked Beck over. Beck stood up with a reasonable nod, moving out to the center of the space between the students and Marco. He grabbed a hold of his belt and tugged it down a bit lower, making sure the very top of the cleft between his butt cheeks was visible until he took a breath and then exhaled slowly.

Murmurs and gasps came from the room as they watched Beck’s ears take on points, then fur and start migrating up through his hair to the top of his head. Soft sideburns pushed out from his cheeks, traces of hair thickened along his neck and shoulders, even his arms. His nails, already painted, soon took on sharp points, but the most distinct feature came as a fluffy, dusty brown tail seemed to spill out of his hind quarters, sloping down behind him. With a deft flick, though, the one tail split into three that twitched and swayed behind him. As the students watched and looked back up, they saw the eye liner like pigment around Beck’s eyes.

There was awe, not just from the other students but from Marco, Fletcher and Udo as well. They'd never seen a kitsune before. Marco felt a little unnerved as well by just how easy the process had been. It wasn't just a transformation, it seemed to border on the edge of magic. There were no groaning bones or popping cartilage. His tails and claws had grown so fast that he wasn't even sure if his cells would have had time to divide or not. It seemed that whatever they were jumping into, it wasn't analogous to lycanthropy.

"I can't top that..." Dathan murmured.

"I can..." Rigo murmured under his breath, giving a playful grin to Beck. Beck smiled at his roommate and moved over - not to his own chair, but to his roommate's before sitting down on his lap. A few more eyebrows went up at that.

"I think I speak for everyone when I say that was cool, but we don't have to out ourselves just to do it unless we want to." Udo said from where he stood, having finished setting up the snack table, "The important thing is that this time is for you." Udo said.

"I mean, I get the whole babysitter, guidance counselor thing, I really do, but like, what's the plan here?" The pale boy asked.

"Zane... right?" Marco asked. The other gave a faint nod.

"Am I right in assuming you're a Varos?" he asked. Again, the other nodded. Marco took a breath, "At the end of the day, people generally come to college to take classes, not just to learn stuff, but to learn how to learn. Knowledge, skills, ways of thinking. The side effect is that by being here, on campus, we're learning to live with others for the first time too - en masse. Everyone copes with that differently. Some pick it up on their own, some like to follow by example, some want more hands-on help. I'm glad you all came here, but you're here by choice. And if you choose to ask for help from us or talk with us, that's great too. This is just where the journey begins." Marco said. Once again there was another pause as everyone contemplated what had been said, as well as the general attitudes of those in attendance.

"Do... um, do you remember any of those cheesy ice breaker games from before?" Rigo asked with a sheepish smile from where he sat with Beck on his lap. Fletcher beamed ear to ear and leaned forward in his seat.

"You have no idea how much cheese this dairy farmer can produce." he said, wagging his eyebrows with excitement.

Echo Creek had seemed quite mild during the day, a college town without its entire student body present yet, but with night settled it seemed that more of the residents had elected to go out. Warm light spilled from the windows of the shops onto the snow kissed ground and one of the coziest locations seemed to be the Echo Creek coffee shop. Webs of Christmas lights were visible through the frosty windows, along with the rich warm wood and black leather booths. The wrought iron sign hung just off center of the entrance, a huge elk drinking from a winding stream. A young man in a sweatshirt and a beanie looked up at it before opening the door and stepping inside, nearly melting as the wall of warm cinnamon scented air hit him.

It took a moment to recover from the welcoming embrace of the coffee shop, but the young man reluctantly started moving again, coming up to the stools along the long counter. He

sidled up to one and looked around, seeing people of all ages talking and drinking. A bubbling din of conversation suffused the shop with life and vitality. When the patron turned back, he inhaled a bit as there was another young man standing directly across from him.

“What can I do for ya?” the barista asked with a smile. His bleach blond hair was feathered, showing darker brown roots and a gold earring hung from his left ear. He was nearly swimming in the brown coffee shop t-shirt and his black apron bunched up where it was tied around his waist. Even his nickname had the elk symbol next to the embossed letters spelling out ‘Thackary’.

“Uh, is it too out of season to have a pumpkin spice latte?” The patron asked hopefully. Thackary smiled warmly.

“Never an off season here. Ya want pumpkin, I got it. Ya want peppermint, not a problem. The echoes of every age run through these walls. What name should I put on the cup?” Thackary asked.

“Kaden.” The visitor replied. Thackary nodded and got to work, moving back to the machines. Kaden watched him go, looking the young man over. He was pretty young and thin, his fingernails painted but showing the wear and tear of someone that picked at them or chewed them out of nervousness. Still, he seemed friendly enough. “How has it been since, uh, they opened everything up?” he asked.

“To the werewolves you mean?” Thackary asked without looking back.

“Yeah, I mean, that’s gotta blow your mind, right?” Kaden asked conversationally. With care, Thackary mixed in the coffee shop’s special blend of pumpkin spice and extracts before he returned to the counter and set the concoction down.

“Where ya from, originally?” Thackary asked. Kaden blushed a bit.

“That obvious?” he asked. Thackary shrugged.

“I get to know most of my customers, and my customers usually get to know each other.” Thackary replied.

“Chicago.” Kaden replied. Thackary nodded.

“Not a lot of werewolves in Chicago?” Thackary grinned. Kaden’s face scrunched up a little at that before he sipped his latte.

“I mean, how can you tell now?” Kaden asked. Thackary gave a bit of a nod at that.

“I guess for me, it’s been several months since that Futurza thing, even longer since the Rising Sun attacks at the airport. All that’s built on top of a foundation I had that there’s always something special about life wherever you go.” Thackary explained.

“So, no problems since the announcement? No fights, no unsavory types?” Kaden asked curiously. Thackary shook his head, carefully thinking back across the last year and a half.

“Nah, I think I ran into more monsters before the world learned werewolves existed.” Thackary said, carefully looking into Kaden’s eyes for a long moment before he gave a small smile again, “Let me know if you need anything to go. I imagine you’ll be getting back on the road soon?” Thackary asked. Kaden shrugged.

“Probably in a day or two. I was just curious about this place.” he replied, sipping his latte again. Thackary smiled.

“Well, if you’re sticking around, you better have something to eat. We have killer brownies.” Thackary beamed brightly. Kaden grinned at that.

“The more chocolate, the better.” he said. Thackary gave a nod before he headed to the covered display to retrieve one of the thick, fudgy brownies covered with a firm layer of tart, orange dark chocolate. Kaden watched the barista for a moment before looking around again at everyone gathered; young, old, male, female... How many of them were werewolves? How many of them had met his brother when he had come to Echo Creek? How many of them knew what had happened to him before he died?

“One decadent delight for my newest customer.” Thackary said, breaking Kaden’s concentration as he set the plate down along with a napkin and a fork.

“You’re a lifesaver.” Kaden said with a grin. Thackary shrugged a little.

“It’s my job.” he said with another small smile, his shrewd eyes still studying his newest customer.

A snap filled the enclosed space as Artyom flapped the sheet out over the bed right before Fletch pounced and crawled across the top, springing to spread it out and start slipping the corners down over the edges of the mattresses. Artyom gave a playful tug on the closer edge to do the same. He shook his head, looking at Fletcher flopping and rolling around as he tried to make the bed.

“I’m going to have to get you a collar with a bell on it, you really are a cat.” Yom said. Fletch hiked up his butt and gave it a little wiggle side to side.

“Don’t make promises you aren’t going to keep.” Fletch smirked, biting his bottom lip before he pushed off with his knees just long enough to get the slack he needed to finish fitting the sheet. With it in place, he rolled off one side and moved back to the hamper to start rooting around for the pillowcases inside.

“I think it went pretty well.” Marco said from where he sat, looking back over the spiral notebook he’d been writing things down in, “Well, maybe except for how the Varos clearly didn’t want to participate.” he said softly.

“Vampires have been hiding for hundreds of years longer than werewolves, and they’ve been better at it.” Artyom said, holding the pillows up while Fletcher wormed the pillowcases around them.

“I don’t think they have the same pack mentality either. Probably less of an instinctive urge to comingle. The fact that they came is a sign that they’re trying.” Fletcher said optimistically. Udo’s muscles tightened a little, thinking back to his run in with Dathan before the orientation.

“They probably have a lot of defense mechanisms, especially the ones that are more than eighteen or nineteen years old.” he said. Marco nodded at that, tilting his head as he heard a chirp from his phone. He reached over to the counter and scooped it up, seeing a delivery notification.

“Looks like the rest of the office supplies got here right before the mail center closed.” Marco said. Udo smiled.

“Want me to go get it?” he offered. Marco shook his head.

“No, I could use a walk myself to think about how today went. How about you pick out what movie we’re going to watch when Duncan gets back from the gym?” Marco smiled.

“It’s a date.” Udo beamed.

“I’m going to make us some popcorn!” Fletcher said gleefully.

“I got some smoked salmon.” Yom offered. Udo made a face.

“That stuff smells foul.” he complained. Yom actually looked surprised.

“That’s part of why it is so good. Where’s your werewolf spirit? It’s rich protein!” Yom asked. Marco smirked, slipping his phone into his pocket as he started looking for his shoes.

The door to the hotel room clicked as the keycard unlocked it, allowing Kaden to step inside. He stretched a bit, rotating his shoulders a little before he eased the door shut behind him. He’d only stepped in earlier long enough to drop off his luggage, but it wasn’t lost on him how much nicer the hotel was compared to his expectations; buttercream colored carpet, actual drapes, and enough lamps spread out to avoid any dark spots. Even the bed lacked the usual tell-tale signs of wear and tear. Kaden was just relieved it hadn’t cost a fortune, although his patrons had been more than generous.

Kaden pulled the hood of his sweatshirt back before extracting his knit beanie. A cascade of black hair came down from where it had been pent up, falling down to his shoulders. He shook his head a little, crossing the room to open the blinds and look out across main street. This late into the evening and people were still coming and going. It wasn’t anything like the little towns he’d visited across the country. Their sidewalks usually rolled up by eight or nine in the evening... but this wasn’t like any of the other towns. It was a sanctuary for monsters, for the cursed and the damned. This was a town that had swallowed his brother whole and left no trace.

With a slight, weary sigh, Kaden moved over to his duffel bag in the corner. Crouching down, he unzipped it and riffled through his clothes before pulling out a scuffed-up silver tablet. With a little prompting from his thumb, the screen flashed and woke from its slumber. A picture of a lone tree overlooking a field appeared and Kaden traced a pattern across the tree. Even as he did it, he could hear the voice of his brother in his head. ‘Those pagan keepers might have magic, but there’s no spell that can get past a good encryption and an attempt limit.’

Responding to his touch, the tablet unlocked. Kaden settled down in the caramel-colored chair in the corner of the hotel room. He couldn’t afford to fall asleep yet, there was still so much to do. He opened up the Notes app on his phone, bringing forward pictures and articles and videos related to Grand Mesa University. There was pain, there was strain, there was anger, but beyond all that there was a need to see it through. Killian had never pulled Kaden into his world, but even from a distance, Kaden knew his brother was doing whatever he could to protect them all. Kaden slowly lifted his head, looking out at the window, seeing the dull glow of light spilling over the rim of trees that bordered the college campus in the distance. Kaden knew he was close to the truth. The only question left was to do with it once he had it.

Laughter echoed across the narrow path between the library and the music building, the bubbling creek doing little to diffuse it. Beck walked along with his arm around Rigo's shoulder, the height difference between the two making it an incredibly comfortable and easy position to be in. Rigo loved having Beck hold him like that. Besides feeling cozy, it kept him close enough that he could smell his roommate's natural musk and the aroma seemed to buzz through his body like a constant electric stream.

"You've got to be insane." Rigo said finally after their laughter died back.

"No, I'm serious, I really think you should go tail out around campus." Beck grinned wide, the light from the lamp posts glinting off his circular glasses.

"It's huge, I'd never be able to sit down. Besides, what if there's someone taking pictures of campus... Tanuki's haven't been all over the newspapers yet." Rigo replied.

"It's just a matter of time, my friend, and just think of the notoriety of being the first!" Beck smirked, although as they moved off the narrow path and onto the wider polished brick, Beck slowed to a stop and his brow furrowed. "Shit, I forgot my ID card for the cafeteria..." Rigo considered for a moment, knowing that the cafeteria was pretty strict on entry while food was being served for all-you-can-eat.

"How about you hurry and get it, but just in case I'll load up my plates and you can eat off my tray if you don't make it in time." Rigo offered. Beck closed his eyes and tilted his head skyward.

"You are a mad genius." he said before giving the top of Rigo's head a kiss before he turned and began jogging back towards the dorm. Rigo stood there for a moment, taking a slow breath of night air before he resumed his journey. He was still getting used to the campus. During the day, one of his favorite spots was the red brick square that extended out over the creek, the sharp corner contrasting the zig-zag way the creek meandered beneath it. The space seemed a lot different at night, though. There were no other students traveling between classes or sitting on the grassy banks. At night it glowed bright orange with the lamp post with only a slight shot of bluish-white light spilling out of the glass panels of the clock tower.

Rigo shivered a bit, realizing how poor of an idea it was to wear sandals in such cold weather. The light of the square fell away behind him, the gleaming windows of the cafeteria in the distance. It didn't occur to him how dark the space was in front of the university center until someone moved up the three cement steps into his path, and even then Rigo couldn't make out anything else than his hooded sweatshirt and dark pants. Rigo adjusted his course to move around the stranger, only to have them take another step to move in front of him again. With that slight movement, in that split second, he felt the course of his life change. No words had been spoken. All Rigo knew was that he was in danger.

Marco pushed out through the front door of Keller Hall, having already braced himself for the cold air. He trudged down the steps and through the snow, his eyes lifting up. It was funny to think how much the campus felt like home to him now. It hadn't been all that long ago that he had been the wary freshman trying to get used to this big, strange place. Now he knew every

nook and cranny, every hidey hole, every spot and feature. Even without being a werewolf, he felt territorial.

It was hard not to be nostalgic as he thought back to his first few weeks. He'd taken part in the campus safety program to earn a little spending money, a choice that had promptly led him to becoming a werewolf. It had certainly been a lot warmer that night... Marco kept up a good pace prompted by the cool temperatures, wanting to make the journey as quickly as he could. He walked along the creek, comforted by the muted glow from the library across the water. A cool breeze rustled through the dried-out leaves on the trees set along the bark dust lining the music building.

As he walked on autopilot, Marco thought about how orientation had gone. It was hard not to feel imposter syndrome given that he'd only had a couple psychology classes over the years and nothing much else in the way of interacting with people, but Fletcher had assured him it had gone despite the push back from the vampire students. Marco crossed the cement bridge before coming to a dead stop. His brown eyes widened in shock, seeing an arm and a head extend from the looming shadow of the university center into the orange glow of the red brick square.

"Oh my god..." Marco murmured, moving over quickly. He tried to look around for threats, for danger, even for anyone else that could help but his eyes hadn't adjusted to the darkness, and he couldn't see anything in front of the university center. Marco dropped down to his knees next to the collapsed figure, reaching out to gently touch the young man's shoulder, "Can you hear me?" Marco asked urgently. There was a soft groan and the figure shifted, tilting his head to look up at Marco from his tired, dark ringed eyes.

"I should have... listened better... about safety..." Rigo said gently. Marco didn't respond to the joke, fishing his phone out of his pocket.

"We're going to get you help, you're going to be okay." Marco said, dialing 911. He continued to kneel by Rigo as it rang and connected, the dispatcher answering on the other side. "There is a student hurt at Grand Mesa. We're on the front side of the University Center, just around the corner from the Moose Fountain." Marco explained. Rigo shakily inclined his head, his feathered hair falling across one eye as he looked down, his hand naturally drifting to the source of his pain. His fingers brushed a translucent shard extending from his stomach. Marco looked down, eyes widening once more, "Uh, I think he's been stabbed..." Marco murmured, answering the inevitable question the dispatcher asked next. Rigo pursed his lips and closed his fingers tighter against the shard, wincing as he started to draw it out.

"Oh fuck..." Rigo groaned.

"Don't take it out, it'll bleed more. The ambulance is on its way." Marco said. Rigo shook his head, his breath short enough that his throat made a soft clicking sound when he exhaled.

"It's not..." Rigo murmured, clenching his teeth, looking worse and worse by the second, forcing himself to take a larger breath, "The bleeding isn't the problem. I can feel it burning, it's not just a knife. Please get it out. Please." Rigo pleaded, looking up at Marco with desperate need in his eyes. Marco was quiet for a moment, barely registering that the dispatcher had given him instructions to keep Rigo awake and alert before disconnecting. Marco lowered the phone to the ground, setting it on the bricks.

“Rigo, if I take it out and it’s in any major organs, the ambulance might not get here in time.” Marco said softly. Rigo took another stilted half-breath.

“Please, trust me, don’t... leave it in.” Rigo said with a stilted half breath. Somewhere in the distance Marco could hear the ambulance siren already wailing into the night air as it left the hospital. Marco was battling himself, remembering all of his first aid lessons he’d taken and weighing that against his experience as a werewolf. If Rigo had healing like the wolves did, having the knife in the way would keep the tissue from knitting together. Even worse, what if it had been poisoned and that was why Rigo felt burning?

“I’m going to take it out. It’s going to hurt. We’re going to count to three so when I pull it out, you try not to move, okay?” Marco said. Rigo nodded, resting his head against Marco’s leg. Marco took a breath to steady himself before he followed Rigo’s arm down, spotting the translucent red shard. It didn’t look like metal, it looked more like frosted glass or something. Licking his lip, Marco gave one last resolute nod, “Okay, on three. One...” Marco said, bringing his fingers to close around the exposed edge of the object. It felt warm to the touch, a lot warmer than glass should have felt. Maybe Rigo’s heat was translating through whatever it was? “Two...” Marco said, making sure his grip was firm, “Three.” he said just as he pulled back on it.

Rigo let out a wail, his head arching back against Marco’s leg, his fingers spasming before he collapsed back, panting quick and shallow. There was a crackle of purple energy that arced across the blade. Marco hissed and let the blade topple to the ground. The sound it made when it hit was like stone hitting stone, or rather crystal. Marco looked down at the weapon in the ruddy orange light, seeing the contours and the shape of it. It was a wicked looking blade, curved and intimidating, but at least half the length had been split into two narrower looking prongs. The only relief that Marco could think of was that it might have done less damage internally than a solid blade would have.

“Thanks...” Rigo said with pained relief, moving his head to rest on Marco’s thigh like it was a pillow. He closed his eyes, something that refocused Marco’s concern at once.

“Hey, you gotta stay with me until the ambulance arrives, okay? Who did this, what did they look like?” Marco asked. Rigo groaned a little, wanting to nap rather than think back on the attack. Still, he knew what Marco was trying to do.

“I couldn’t see him. It was too dark. Some guy, a little taller than me. Just came out and stabbed me.” Rigo said, although his brow furrowed as he thought back about it, “He didn’t... just stab me. He was holding onto the knife until I tried to get away and it snapped.” Rigo murmured. Marco looked back at the knife again, seeing the clean break where it would have connected to the hilt. He knew that it would be taken as evidence by the authorities. Marco reached down and grabbed his phone, taking a quick picture of the knife. Rigo and Marco both winced as the flash flared off of the ground in the otherwise dim space.

It took a few moments for Marco’s eyes to recover from the flash, and by the time he saw the red and blue shimmer on the clock tower, he had assumed it was floaters until the EMTs came down the pathway around the fountain with flashlights and a stretcher. Everything moved forward with the clinical precision of professionals doing their jobs. Marco felt as if he was on autopilot, answering questions and repeating the order of events even as Rigo was moved onto

the backboard and lifted up onto the stretcher frame. Rigo reached out, his fingers brushing Marco's hand before he was wheeled away towards the ambulance.

The lights and sounds of the ambulance had been enough to draw the attention of other students on campus, students that were filtering out of the cafeteria and Sycamore Hall. Marco knew the police would have questions, that they'd want to sequester the knife. Marco looked up at the gathering crowd, seeing the tall, skinny frame of Beck trying to squeeze through everyone to see what was going on. Even in the darkness, even across the distance, when Beck met eyes with Marco, he froze, wordlessly understanding the look on his face. Whatever had happened, it had happened to Rodrigo.