

Chapter 1  
The Lecture

“You missed the lecture...again.”

Hollis’ slight frame leaned against the desk where his best friend sat poring over a volume that looked at least a thousand years old. It was so large it took up almost the whole desk.

“I haven’t got time for useless lectures on the Ancients and Astronomy.” Erik elbowed Hollis away from a stack of papers he needed.

“Architecture,” Hollis corrected him. Erik glared.

“What I’m doing here is going to change things forever. I’m this close to isolating a genome.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

“A sequence of strands in your body’s make-up. I’m searching for a perfect mixture of genomes. If I isolate the strands in a Kiatri that make them live so long; and add the strand that causes werewolf to grow so large, but eliminates the fierce nature of their lycanthropy. Then I can add the intellect of the Light Ones, and what kind of human could we spawn?”

“So, you’re not interested in the cheese and wine mingling in the courtyard, then?” Hollis quipped, studying his fingernails.

Erik rolled his eyes and sighed so heavily that Hollis couldn’t help laughing. The two had been inseparable since Hollis paid his first visit to the Elythium two years ago. The academy had opened its doors to foreign students and Hollis’ father insisted he apply immediately. He had toured the institution in a small group of students applying for the following year. The tall, lanky boy from Halanah had taken an instant liking to Hollis and the two applied to room together the following trimester. Two years later, they were the closest either had to a brother. Hollis, two years older than Erik, usually led the way in forcing Erik into the social life at the academy.

“Come on, Erik! You’re eighteen. You don’t have to spawn superhuman lycanthropes this second, do you? You’re already up for the governorship commendation, the Golden Leaf Award and the *Diokos Programme*. Come, have a bit of fun, just for tonight.”

“Let me finish this one thing. If I can just—” Hollis took Erik’s arm and steered him from his chair. “Hollis, I haven’t got anything clean to wear,” he protested as Hollis dragged him to the door.

“Well, we certainly have to find you something. You smell like you haven’t bathed in a week.”

Erik finally smiled and stumbled across the threshold into the stone corridor that attached the dormitories of the Elythium. “I don’t think I’ve even been out of that room in a week,” he muttered.

Hollis roughed up Erik’s golden curls playfully. “It might actually surprise you how many attractive things there are at the Elythium that have nothing to do with ancient tomes.”

Hollis stood next to a much less disheveled, if not perfectly groomed, best friend, holding a goblet of wine and trying to engage him in the evening. “That one. The pretty blonde.” He gestured toward a group of Lightling girls, all very tall and attractive.

“Imagine what our offspring would look like, though.” Erik squinted at the girl. Her careful draping of her pure white toga showcased her long legs so well Hollis could tell it was difficult for Erik to look at her for too long.

“Forget genomes for a moment, please. She’s really brilliant, actually. She was at the lecture today and had good questions for *Omilitis* Alesondro.” Hollis smiled when Erik stood up a little straighter armed with this information. He sincerely hoped the girl was somewhat intelligent, he couldn’t remember her saying a single thing at the lecture.

“Do you think she knows anything about cross-speciation?”

“You’ll never know until you ask, you old romantic.” Hollis planted a hand in Erik’s back and shoved him towards the girl. Erik threw a terrified glance over his shoulder, but Hollis raised his glass in silent salute to his friend’s courage.

He glanced over the crowd for himself now. It was the usual mix of couples happily enjoying an Elythium sponsored evening: young women who were all single, but gathered in clumps harder to penetrate than Erik’s thick skull, and a few scattered misfits seeking connection.

A swish of lavender gauze and shining black hair caught his eye. One girl, tiny and graceful, glided through the crowd, casting her attention here and there, making the head of every male in the room swivel after her. Her dress swirled around her figure, accenting every feature perfectly. Hollis felt his pulse quicken. She turned her sapphire blue eyes toward him and he held his breath.

“I see I’m not the only one whose lineage is slightly off for this party,” said the girl, floating toward him.

Hollis smiled at her. “Fortunate for us the Light Ones aren’t afraid to branch out in their search for excellent minds. I’m Hollis Farrell. You aren’t a local, I presume.”

She stretched a hand. He took it, and brushed his lips against her smooth skin.

“Dahlia. But if I tell you where I’m from, you must promise to keep it strictly confidential.”

To Hollis’ surprise, she didn’t withdraw her hand, but stepped closer and squeezed his fingers. He grinned. “I was always a good secret-keeper.”

“Hollis? It sounds...mountainish. You are Kiatri, then?”

Hollis dipped his head.

“So, you look like you’re sixteen, but you’re what, three hundred years old?”

He winked at her. “Twenty.”

“How can I know you’re telling the truth? You’re good at keeping secrets I hear.”

Hollis laughed. “Not so good at lying, though.” He glanced guiltily at Erik, who made no effort to hide his boredom in the presence of the blonde Lightling.

Dahlia followed Hollis’ gaze. “Your friend?”

“Yes. I forced him to come, but I’ve set him up with the wrong type of girl.”

“Why? Does he prefer only those in similarly frayed tunics who don’t own hairbrushes?”

Her snobbery left a sour taste in his mouth. He frowned, and dropped her hand. “Erik is brilliant: a prodigy of this institution. Appearance is hardly his main concern.”

She cocked one eyebrow at his rebuke. “Clearly. So are we allowed to escape, or do we have to wait for him?”

“I wasn’t planning any sort of escape.” Hollis took a sip of wine. It felt thick when he tried to swallow. Mesmerizing as she was, the girl was grating on him.

“Ah, you came to ‘mingle’ then?”

“Well why did *you* come?”

“To find someone interesting.”

“Then you should definitely speak to Erik. He’s much more interesting than I.”

“You’ll do.” Dahlia smiled then. “I haven’t had anything to drink yet, and the table looks full of delicious things. Shall we try some?” She ran her hand down his arm, closing her fingers around his wrist. He felt lightheaded as she tugged him forward.

“I suppose we should. You still haven’t told me where you’re from.”

She smiled. “Oh, I’m from a bit farther north.” Stopping at the tables groaning under piles of breads and cheeses, she turned back to him and hooked her fingers around his wine goblet. Hollis surrendered it without a fight.

“What’s farther north than here?”

“I suppose I should say: the entrance to my land is farther north.” She watched Hollis as she raised his glass to her shiny red lips.

Realization struck Hollis and he froze. “Wait. You’re a fairy?”

Her eyes widened innocently and she handed back his drink. “Shall we start with the bread?”

“I may need more wine. Or perhaps I should pace myself if I’m to stay safe in the presence of a fey.”

She dismissed his concern with wave of her hand. “When you’ve lived a few hundred more years, as you surely will, Kiatri, you’ll learn no matter the precautions, being with a fey is never safe.”

“Erik? Aren’t you coming back to the room at some point tonight?”

Hollis had searched every known library on campus over an hour before finding this basement. Erik had settled on a pile of cushions, surrounded by books full of diagrams of human anatomy and complicated mathematical equations.

“You disappeared. Did you go somewhere with that fey girl?”

Hollis pretended to be engrossed in a diagram of the werewolf’s skeletal structure. “Who told you that?”

“I’m not stupid. I know a fairy when I see one.” Erik put down his book long enough to scribble something on a roll of parchment. “So, love at first sight?”

Hollis shrugged. “Fascination. I had never met a fairy. She’s ... intoxicating, but not necessarily in a good way, you know?”

“No. I’ve never been intoxicated, and I’ve never thought there was anything good about it.”

“Did you have a good time? What was her name?”

“I don’t know. I wasn’t interested enough to find out. Boring as a dry biscuit. I wanted to get down here after hours anyway. There are two or three things I needed to double-check.”

Hollis rolled his eyes toward the low, plastered ceilings. “That’s the third girl this semester you’ve dismissed without giving them a chance. Are we even supposed to be in here? I heard the lower levels were off limits without an escort.”

Erik speared him with a look. “We’re here to learn. They can’t restrict that. I somehow don’t think they’ll tell me off even if it’s not allowed. I haven’t told you, but Amastole himself has taken an interest in my theories.”

Hollis’ eyebrows shot up. “You’re kidding! How did he even hear of a second year pupil’s work?”

“*Omilitis* Marcole told him. Amastole asked to see my papers, and if he’s impressed he’ll apprentice me.”

“Brilliant. Really, that is wonderful. I couldn’t be happier for you.” Hollis clapped Erik’s shoulder affectionately. “But sleeping; that still matters too. What do you say we get out of this book-lined tomb and have something to celebrate?”

Erik’s eyebrows knit together. “You’re always making me do pointless things.”

Hollis pulled a bottle from a leather satchel at his waist. “Not entirely pointless. I don’t know much about genomes or anything, but I hear hydration and rest are fairly prominent needs for those ‘sequences of strands’ that make up our bodies.”

“Did you steal a bottle of wine? What is wrong with you?”

“I didn’t steal it. It was a gift.”

Erik frowned at the bottle. “Hydration,” he mumbled. “Right. If you drink a bucket of water with it, maybe. And who was this gift from?”

Hollis cleared his throat; it had suddenly gone very dry. “No one in particular.” He produced two glasses wrapped in handkerchiefs. “Shall we toast the Head Governor of the Elythium’s new star pupil?”

“Oh, go on then. Just one glass. It makes my brain foggy. And who knows what that fey girl slipped into it.”