

ONE THE LECTURE

“**Y**ou missed the lecture on Ancient Architectural Structures...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. “And you signed up the for the course, if I recall. And forced me to take it with you,” he added under his breath.

Erik glared at him. “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. For instance, if I can find what makes Kiatri live so long, and what makes the werewolf grow so large, but, take out the fierce nature of their lycanthropy and add the intellect of the Light Ones, 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 entering the following year. The tall, lanky boy from Halanah had taken an instant liking to Hollis and the two asked to room together the following trimester. A full year 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 surprise you how many attractive things there are at the Elythium that have nothing to do with academics.”



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 whose 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. Hollis sincerely hoped the girl was somewhat intelligent. While he definitely saw her at the lecture, she hadn't spoken a word except in giggly whispers to the girl on her right.

"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 cast a terrified glance at Hollis over his shoulder and fumbled toward the group containing the tall blonde. Hollis raised his goblet in a silent toast 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.

A swish of gauze and shining black hair caught his eye. One young woman, 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," the girl purred, floating toward him.

Hollis smiled at her. "Lucky for us the Light Ones aren't afraid to branch out. I'm Hollis Farrell."

She offered a hand. He took it, and brushed his lips against it lightly.

"Dahlia. But if I tell you where I'm from, you must promise not to tell."

Hollis was surprised she didn't withdraw her hand, but stepped closer and squeezed his fingers. "I was always a good secret-keeper," he said.

"Hollis," she moved her tongue around her mouth as though tasting his name. "It sounds - mountainish. And you look like you're fifteen, but you if you are Kiatri as I suspect, you could be hundreds of years old and still look like a child."

"True enough."

Dahlia smirked and cocked her head to the side as though she studied him. "I will guess then, you are roughly three hundred years old?"

The Kiatri's thousand-year lifespan wasn't something people usually commented on. He wasn't sure if they felt it was rude, like commenting on someone's weight gain or disfigurement, but the fact that Dahlia mentioned it now forced a grin from him. "Twenty."

She raised one eyebrow. "How would I know you're telling the truth? You're good at keeping secrets, I hear."

Hollis laughed. "Not very good at lying, though." He glanced at Erik, whose slumped posture and intimate study of his glass told Hollis the brighter Lightling was bored and irritated in the presence of the blonde girl.

Dahlia followed Hollis' gaze to Erik. Her eyes narrowed a bit as she appraised him. "Your friend?"

"Yes. I sort of forced him to come, but I think I set him up with the wrong type of girl."

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

The sneer in her voice struck Hollis. He released her hand and took a sip of wine. “Erik is brilliant. Appearance is hardly his main concern.”

She rolled her incredibly blue eyes. “Clearly. So are we allowed to escape, or do we have to wait for him?”

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

“Ah, you came to ‘mingle’ then?” Now she was making fun of him.

“Well why did *you* come?”

“To find someone interesting.”

Hollis drained his glass and felt himself thawing. “Then you should definitely be speaking to Erik. He’s much more interesting than I.”

“You’ll do.” Dahlia smiled then and Hollis sucked in a breath. “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 and gripped his wrist invitingly. His head felt swimmy as she tugged him forward.

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

Her eyes twinkled. “Oh, I’m from farther north.” She stopped at the tables groaning under piles of every variety of breads and cheese. She took his wine goblet.

“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 perfect red lips. That hue couldn’t possibly be natural.

Realization struck Hollis and his heart skipped. “You’re a fairy?”

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



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

It was well after curfew and Hollis had searched every library on campus for over an hour before finally working his way to this moldy basement. Erik had settled on a pile of cushions, surrounded by books full of diagrams of human anatomy and complicated mathematical equations.

“Thanks for pawning me off on that piece of human plaster and then disappearing. Did you go somewhere with that fey girl?”

Hollis flushed and pretended to be extremely interested in a complex diagram of the skeletal structure of a fully transformed werewolf. “Who told you she was fey?”

“I’m no idiot. I know a fairy when I see one.” Erik scrawled something on a scroll of parchment. “So, love at first sight?”

Hollis tugged the scroll from his friend. He didn’t know why he wanted so badly for Erik to look at him. To engage in the conversation. To tell him he thought Dahlia was a good idea. “Just fascination. I’ve never met a fairy before. She’s a bit ... intoxicating, but not necessarily in a good way, you know?”

Erik looked up and sighed, his fingertips still on the scroll so Hollis wouldn’t take it. “No. I’ve never been intoxicated, but 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.” Erik said. Hollis rolled his eyes toward the vaulted ceilings. “I wanted to get down here after hours anyway. There are two or three things I needed to double-check.”

“Are we allowed in here? I heard the lower levels were off limits without an escort.”

Erik speared him with a look. “We’re at this institution to learn. They can’t restrict that. Besides, I don’t think they’ll tell me off even if it’s not allowed. There’s something I haven’t told you yet. It just happened today.”

Seeing Erik’s eyes fill with anything besides boredom made Hollis smile. “Tell me.”

“Amistole himself has taken interest in my theories.”

Hollis’ eyebrows shot up. That the Chief Omilitus of the Elythium would take personal notice of any of them was astounding. Hollis had heard him speak once at an orientation assembly and Amistole held the room spellbound for an hour. “You’re kidding! How did he even hear of a second year pupil’s work?”

“*Omilitis* Marcole told him. Amistole called me to his personal think space today. He wants to see my papers, and if he’s impressed he’ll apprentice me.”

Hollis swallowed the urge to chuckle that the Omiliti called their offices “think spaces” but now wasn’t the moment for the joke. “Brilliant. Really, that is wonderful. I couldn’t be happier for you.” Hollis clapped Erik’s shoulder affectionately. “Also sleeping; that matters too. What do you say we get out of this book-lined tomb and have a little drink to celebrate?”

Erik’s eyes narrowed. “You’re always making me do pointless things.”

Hollis pulled a slender blue 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 this ‘sequences of strands’ that make up my body.”

“Did you pilfer a bottle of the Elythium’s wine from that stupid party? What is wrong with you?”

“I didn’t steal it. It was a gift.”

“A gift from whom?” Erik frowned at the bottle. Hollis wiggled his eyebrows instead of answering. “Hydration,” Erik grumbled. “Right. If you drink a bucket of water with it, maybe.”

Hollis produced two glasses wrapped in handkerchiefs. “Shall we toast Amistole’s new star pupil?”

Erik’s face cracked into a ghost of a smile for the first time all evening. “Oh, go on then. Just one glass. It makes my brain foggy. And who knows what that fey girl slipped into it.”