Shadeside

by MultiMapper

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Part 1: For the Night

Chapter 1

As the sun finally sank below the horizon, a lone figure sat, huddled into himself on the bench in the otherwise empty public park.

The chill of the late autumn wind stirred the few remaining fallen leaves, adding to the feeling of desolation.

The wind blew through the boy's light summer jacket as if it were nothing. But the young teenager didn't make any move to acknowledge the cold.

He was too tired to shiver anymore. All he could think of was the empty aching in his stomach.

It was getting to be the time of day when there might be some good pickings left in the garbage cans outside some of the restaurants.

It occurred to him that there was that 'other way' of getting food that some of the other runaways had told him about. They had told him that there were men who would pay him if he would do them certain favors.

He didn't see the point of thinking much along those lines. In the whole time he had been on the streets, no one had ever approached him asking for or offering anything.

After months of struggling to survive on his own, he couldn't seem to find a reason why he should continue to bother.

If he found food this day and somehow managed to survive the bitter cold of the coming night, he would just have to face the same dilemma tomorrow. And as winter approached, it would only get worse.

He couldn't find a reason to struggle against what seemed to be the inevitable. He was so tired of fighting it. Giving up would be the easiest thing in the world. He didn't have to do anything. He could just continue to sit on the park bench.

Just sit and wait for it.

If he waited long enough, eventually his eyes would close... never to open again.

Just three months ago when he had left his home, he somehow thought... or more accurately, he didn't think, he had just assumed that he would find a way to survive. The flaw in his ill conceived plan became evident almost immediately following his arrival in the city. The thing that he didn't expect, that he couldn't imagine, was that the people in the city behaved so differently from the people back home in the hills.

Since his arrival, it had occurred to him that he might already be dead. Maybe he was only a ghost, damned to drift through the mortal world, eternally struggling, eternally suffering. The people he passed by every day walked past him without ever seeing him. Even when he was right in front of them, they appeared to look right through him.

Well, one thing was for sure. If he was a ghost, he was a hungry one.

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"Want some?"

The boy was startled out of his thoughts by the sound and turned to see a man sitting on the bench next to him. The man was wearing a very nice overcoat that seemed tailored to match his three piece suit. The young teen only noticed this in the periphery however, the majority of his attention was focused on the half of a sandwich the man was offering to him.

The boy looked around quickly to be sure that the man was really talking to him, then said, "Yes. Thank you."

He cautiously took the offered sandwich, and after taking a bite, looked more closely at the man beside him.

The man was sitting quietly and eating the other half of the sandwich as he looked out across the park.

The teen vaguely recognized the man as someone he had seen before. The man was one of those people who he would pass occasionally, just a random face in the crowd that had turned up enough times to register as someone who belonged there.

Now that he had a moment to look at the man, he realized that he was actually sort of handsome. He was around thirty years old, certainly not over thirty-five. However, there was something about the way that he was gazing off into the distance that seemed to make him look older than his years.

The boy took another bite of the sandwich and marveled at the amazing flavor of the ham & cheese. Suddenly it occurred to him that he should be polite enough to at least make an attempt at conversation, since the stranger had been kind enough to share his dinner.

"I've seen you in the library." the boy said cautiously.

"Yes." The man said with his attention still focused ahead of him. "Also in the park by Central High School."

The young teen looked at his companion with surprise, not remembering having seen him there.

"The way things have been going, we seemed to be destined to eventually meet." The man said quietly, almost timidly.

The boy noticed an emotional tone under his companion's words that he couldn't quite identify. The man sounded... tired? Weary?

"I guess so." the boy said hesitantly, afraid that if he said the wrong thing, the friendly stranger might go away. "I'm Desi."

"It's nice to meet you, Desi. I'm Rafe." the man said and offered his hand.

Desi carefully accepted the gloved hand and shook it gently.

"It feels like it's going to be a cold night." Rafe said as he looked at Desi with concern.

"Yeah. It feels that way." Desi said reluctantly.

"Please forgive me if I've jumped to the wrong conclusion, but... do you have a warm place to stay tonight?" Rafe asked hesitantly.

Desi knew all too well that his pride wouldn't keep him warm, so he reluctantly answered, "No. I don't."

"Well, I have a spare room at my place." Rafe said carefully as he turned his gaze back toward the center of the park.

"Would you... I mean, are you inviting me to come home with you?" Desi asked in a quivering voice.

"Yes, Desi." Rafe said gently, then turned to look Desi in the eyes as he said, "I could really use the company, and you'd be welcomed."

Desi thought about the things the other runaways had told him about what the men expected from them. He looked at Rafe appraisingly, then realized that the choice had already been made. If he stayed outside on a night like this, it was very likely that he would freeze to death. It was literally a choice between life and death.

"Yeah. I'd like to." Desi said as he forced himself to meet Rafe's eyes.

"Good." Rafe smiled. "Then we should be going. It's really getting cold."

An involuntary smile crossed Desi's face as he nodded.

"Come on." Rafe said casually as he stood and offered his hand.

Desi took the offered hand and slowly stood.

"Do you have anything you need to collect before we go?" Rafe asked curiously, then at Desi's uncomprehending stare, Rafe clarified, "Like clothes?"

"Oh. Right." Desi said suddenly. "Yeah. Right over here. I'll just be a second. Wait right here."

Rafe smiled and nodded as Desi ran to the bushes behind them and retrieved a tattered army duffel bag that had more than a few denim patches sewn onto it.

"My car is just on the next block." Rafe said as Desi joined him at his side.

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"I thought it was this block." Rafe said as he looked around slowly.

Desi stood at Rafe's side, not knowing what he could do except follow along.

"Let's try that way." Rafe said as he pointed, then started walking.

Desi nodded once, then fell into step at Rafe's side.

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"I couldn't have gotten into town without it. I know I parked it around here somewhere." Rafe said in frustration.

Desi tried to suppress a smile.

"Maybe back that way." Rafe said as he started walking in a different direction.

"Do you lose your car often?" Desi hesitantly asked.

"Not often." Rafe said casually. "But when you go through the same routine, day after day, one day seems to blend into another and they all end up looking exactly the same. Some of the little details end up getting lost in the haze."

Desi nodded, being able to relate to the feeling from his own experiences.

"There it is." Rafe said with relief.

Desi looked at the car that Rafe was walking toward and realized for the first time that Rafe must have some serious money.

Even though Desi wasn't very interested in cars, he knew enough to recognize the Mercedes emblem; and from the condition of the car, he guessed that this must be a brand new, 1971 Mercedes convertible, and it looked to be fresh off the showroom floor.

Rafe walked to the passenger side and opened the door for Desi before walking around to get in the driver's side.

"I don't want to get it dirty." Desi said as he looked at the flawless chocolate colored interior.

"You won't. Get in." Rafe said casually, then sat down.

Desi cautiously climbed into the passenger seat and settled his duffel bag on the floor between his legs.

"You can throw that in the back seat if you like." Rafe said as he started the car.

Desi knew that his new friend, Rafe, just wanted him to be comfortable and that putting his duffel bag in the back seat was a very practical suggestion. But for whatever reason, he just felt more secure holding the few possessions that he owned close to him.

"Sit back and relax. I live outside of town so it's going to take a little while to get us there." Rafe said as he expertly navigated his way through the downtown streets of Columbus.

Desi nodded, then noticed the warm air starting to blow from the car's heater.

"Do you like bean soup?" Rafe asked casually.

Desi turned and looked at Rafe for a moment, then slowly said, "Yes. I do."

"Good. I was thinking that when we get home, you could take a nice hot shower to get warmed up and while you're doing that, I could make us some soup and some more sandwiches."

"That sounds great." Desi said with an honest smile.

Desi didn't know what Rafe was going to ask for in payment. But considering that just minutes before, he had been ready to give up everything, and let it finally end, there wasn't anything he could think of that Rafe could ask of him that he would refuse.

The other runaways told him that it wasn't that bad after the first few times. You got used to it.

"Do you have a favorite soft drink?" Rafe asked curiously.

"Um..." Desi stammered, then answered, "Yeah. Coke."

"I'm going to stop in at the store up here to get drinks. Is there anything else that you need?" Rafe asked casually.

Desi puzzled over the question.

He had nothing.

All he had known for the past few months was constant want and need.

And yet now that he was faced with the question, he had no answer.

"I can't think of anything." Desi said honestly.

"I'll be just a minute." Rafe said as he pulled the car to a stop in front of a small grocery store, then pulled the parking brake.

Desi watched in astonishment as Rafe got out of the car and left it running.

He looked around the parking lot for a moment to find that no one else was around, then at the keys hanging in the ignition. He wasn't a thief. In fact, stealing went against everything that he believed to be good and true. But in his desperate situation, he couldn't help but think about how easy it would be to slide over and release the brake and just... go.

Desi shook his head to dispel the thought and finally allowed himself to rest back in the plush, comfortable seat.

The warm air blowing from the car's heater along with the dull rumble of the engine idling lulled Desi into a very peaceful and much needed sleep.

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"Desi?" Rafe said quietly.

"Yes?" Desi responded, then blinked in confusion. It took a moment for him to remember where he was and what he was doing.

"We're here." Rafe said gently.

"Oh. Okay. I'm sorry, I must have fallen asleep." Desi said nervously.

"That's fine. From the way you were sleeping, I'm sure you needed it." Rafe said with a smile.

"Yeah. I guess so." Desi said shyly.

"Come on. Grab your stuff and come inside." Rafe said, then opened his door to get out of the car.

Desi looked around and was surprised to see that they were parked inside a building.

It took a moment for his sleep fogged mind to surmise that they were in a garage.

When his gaze stopped on Rafe waiting by a door at the back of the room, Desi quickly gathered up his knapsack and got out of the car.

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"This is the laundry room." Rafe said, as they walked in from the garage.

Desi looked around and was frankly impressed.

His mama only had a wash tub and a clothes line to do her laundry.

Rafe had a washer and dryer along with a wash sink all in a row on one side of the room. There was a work table, ironing board and a hanging rack for clothes on the other side.

"If you have anything that needs to be washed in your bag there, you can leave it in here and I'll start a load as soon as you're out of the shower." Rafe said casually.

"I'm pretty sure all of this needs to be washed. But you shouldn't have to mess with it. If you'll show me what to do, I can wash them myself." Desi said quietly.

"All I have to do is put the clothes in there and add soap. It's really no problem at all." Rafe said frankly.

"Okay. I'll just leave this here then." Desi said uncertainly as he placed his knapsack on the work table.

"Good. And when you're done with your shower, I'll get the clothes that you're wearing so they can be washed as well." Rafe said with a smile as he gestured to a door on the opposite side of the laundry room.

Desi nervously followed Rafe out of the room, realizing that if Rafe were going to wash all his clothes at once, he'd have nothing at all to wear.

He tried to quash the nervousness he was feeling and tell himself that this was the price to be paid for the food and, if he could keep from screwing things up, a warm place to spend the night.

"Here's the kitchen. It's pretty well stocked. You'll probably want to avoid the juice in the glass pitcher in the refrigerator, but you're welcomed to anything else you'd like. You can just help yourself." Rafe said casually, then gestured for Desi to follow him.

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Desi's mouth fell open when he saw the next room.

For Desi it was like stepping into one of the old movies that his mom loved so much.

The room was huge and elegantly furnished.

The more he looked, the more there was to see.

Finally, the curved staircase drew his eyes upward to the walkway that encircled the room and led to the upstairs rooms.

His eyes continued upward until he was nearly looking straight up at an enormous crystal chandelier.

"That's beautiful." Desi gasped in wonder.

"You say that now. Just wait till it's time to clean it." Rafe said frankly, then smiled at Desi's look of amazement.

"Come on. You'll have plenty of time to explore later." Rafe said and motioned toward the staircase.

"How many people live here?" Desi asked absently as he tried to absorb every detail of his new surroundings.

"Just me." Rafe said simply, then added, "I have a housekeeper that comes in once a week to do the dusting and things like that."

Desi shook his head in shock, finding it nearly impossible to believe that anyone really lived like they did in the movies.

"This will be your room." Rafe said as he opened the bedroom door and stood aside.

Desi cautiously stepped into the room and looked around.

"I've never even dreamed of anyplace this nice." Desi said in a whisper.

Rafe smiled at the statement, then walked past Desi to a door at the other side of the room.

"This is your bathroom. You have soap and shampoo... everything you'll need. I think..." Rafe trailed off and ducked into the bathroom.

He returned a few seconds later and said, "Yes. There's even a new toothbrush."

Desi stared at Rafe for a moment, then whispered, "Thank you."

"You're very welcome." Rafe said formally, then continued more casually, "I'll be down in the kitchen when you're finished. Remember to bring down the clothes you're wearing so I can start the wash."

Desi slowly nodded that he would.

"There's a robe on the back of the bathroom door that you can wear while your clothes are in the laundry." Rafe said casually, then started for the door.

"Really, Rafe." Desi said quickly to gain his attention, "Thank you."

Rafe smiled and nodded before leaving the room.

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As he was showering, Desi puzzled over the situation he found himself in.

Rafe was treating him better than anyone in his life ever had. A part of him was saying that he should just accept what he was being given and be grateful for it. And he was grateful. But he couldn't shake the feeling that something good doesn't come without a price. And as good as all of this seemed to be, the price must be something beyond his imagining.

Desi walked slowly down the curved staircase, holding his bundle of clothes in his arms and once again tried to absorb every detail of the incredible home that he found himself in.

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"Great timing." Rafe said cheerfully as Desi finally walked into the kitchen. "If you'll drop those in the laundry room, I'll start putting food out on the table."

Desi slowly nodded, then walked through the kitchen and into the laundry room.

He noticed that his clothes had been removed from the duffel bag and were sorted into 'light' and 'dark' piles.

As he sat down his bundle, he saw that two dimes and three pennies had been removed from the clothing and were sitting on the table beside his empty duffel bag.

'I guess this proves that he's not after my money.' Desi thought to himself with a nervous internal chuckle as he turned to leave the laundry room.

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"I hope you're hungry." Rafe said as he placed a pan of steaming hot soup on a trivet in the middle of the kitchen table.

Desi nodded as the smell of the bean and bacon soup reawakened his briefly absent hunger.

"Help yourself to the soup and sandwiches while I get our drinks." Rafe said as he walked to the refrigerator.

Desi felt a little bit uncomfortable serving himself, afraid that he would accidentally mess something up, but did as he was told and ladled himself a bowl of soup and took one of the sandwiches from the plate in the center of the table.

"Here you go." Rafe said as he placed a bottle of Coke by Desi's soup bowl and a glass of orange juice by his own. "I have mustard if you need it."

After swallowing, Desi said, "No. This is perfect."

Rafe smiled at the response, then settled in to enjoy his own dinner.

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The pair ate silently.

Desi would occasionally sneak a glance at his host and try to speculate what payment was going to be expected of him.

"You seem nervous, is there something wrong?" Rafe asked curiously.

"No. Everything is great." Desi said a little bit too quickly.

"Have you had enough? You'll be able to come back in for a snack later if you get hungry again." Rafe said seriously.

Desi thought for a moment, not sure of what he should do or say. If he said that he was finished, then that might mean that it was time for him to repay Rafe for his hospitality. On the other hand, if he said that he wasn't finished and then tried to eat another bite of food, he'd burst.

"Yeah. I'm done." Desi said quietly, then quickly added, "The food was wonderful."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, but honestly, I didn't do much more than open a can and turn on the stove." Rafe said quietly.

"Well, whatever you did, you did it perfectly because everything was great." Desi said with conviction.

"If you want to go into the living room and relax, I'll get this put away and start your laundry. It'll just take me a few minutes." Rafe said casually.

Desi nodded, then walked into the living room, feeling like a condemned man walking to his execution.

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"How are you feeling, Desi?" Rafe asked as he walked into the living room.

"Warm." Desi said standing directly in front of the fireplace, very aware that he was only wearing a terrycloth robe.

"I'm glad." Rafe said as he walked to a winged back chair that faced the fireplace and took a seat.

Desi glanced over at him and didn't know if he was supposed to be doing something.

"Will you tell me why you're so nervous?" Rafe asked gently.

Desi struggled within himself whether or not he should say it, but since Rafe had asked the question, it seemed only right that he should answer it.

"I appreciate everything that you're doing for me. I mean, giving me food and a warm place to spend the night." Desi said slowly, hoping that some divine inspiration would come to him so that he wouldn't have to say the next words.

"But I don't know why you're doing it. I mean, I've heard some things, and if that's what you want, I'd do it. But I've never done it and I don't know how to do it. I mean, I guess I'm scared. But if that's what you want, I'll do it, I will." Desi babbled until he finally ran out of words.

"I think I understand. Thank you for telling me." Rafe said gently.

Desi looked at Rafe cautiously, not knowing what to expect next.

"Why don't you come over here and sit with me and I'll tell you exactly why I'm doing this and what my expectations of you are." Rafe said as he gestured to the ottoman before him.

Desi walked the two steps to stand before Rafe, then sat, being careful that his robe didn't open and expose him.

"Every day, I get up and go to work. When my day is done, I come home. Sometimes I'll go out to dinner or to a club, but I always come back here, to this. When I kept seeing you in the park and at the library, It occurred to me that I might have found someone as alone as I am. Then tonight, when the weather started turning so cold and I saw you in the park, it all came together in my mind. I thought that maybe, if I offered you a place to stay, we might be able to keep each other company and solve both our problems." Rafe said slowly.

After a long considering moment, Desi hesitantly nodded.

"And what I expect from you is honesty. If you're uncomfortable or unhappy for some reason, I'd like for you to share that with me so maybe I can do something to help to make it better." Rafe continued as he looked into Desi's eyes.

After a moment to consider the words, Desi quietly said, "I think I can do that."

"I thought you could." Rafe said with a smile.

"So you don't want to... you know, do that stuff... to me?" Desi asked hesitantly.

"No, Desi." Rafe said gently. "I promise that you won't have to do anything sexual to stay here."

"Thanks." Desi said shyly. "You're really nice."

"Actually, right this minute, I feel so selfish that I can barely stand myself." Rafe said frankly.

Desi stared at Rafe with surprise at the statement.

"Even though I may be helping you out of an unfortunate situation, my motives aren't nearly as altruistic as I would like. I was alone, so I took action to fulfill my own need for companionship. And in doing so, I involved you. Although I suspect that the result may improve things for you, at least to some degree, I still regret that I wasn't able to think of your needs before my own." Rafe said quietly.

"I think you're wrong." Desi said slowly.

Rafe looked at Desi with question.

"Look at you. You're rich. You're handsome. I'm pretty sure that you could pick and choose from dozens, maybe hundreds of people. All you'd have to do is choose one and if you wanted them, they'd be yours. But you chose me. An ignorant hoopie who didn't have the sense to stay where he belonged. I'm not smart or handsome. There's nothing that I could offer you that you couldn't get somewhere else. I mean, yeah, you were lonely, but instead of just picking someone, or a lot of someones, you picked me. A runaway who could rob you or even murder you in your sleep. You chose to take a chance and trust me. So you found someone who could really benefit from your help and then chose to help him, and hopefully, solve your own problem in the process. I think that choice proves that you are a good person."

"Maybe." Rafe relented, then said more quietly, "Regardless of my motives, I'm glad that you ended up here."

"So am I." Desi said shyly.

"By the way, what's a hoopie?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"That's what the town folk call hill people back where I'm from." Desi said quietly.

"Where is that?" Rafe asked curiously.

"West Virginia." Desi said shyly.

Rafe could tell that Desi wasn't comfortable with this turn in the conversation. "You look like you're going to be ready for bed soon, so I should tell you about what to expect tomorrow."

Desi looked at Rafe with question.

"I have to work in the morning, but then I'm off for the weekend. I know that I need to take you shopping for some new clothes, but maybe you could be thinking about what else you'd like to do." Rafe said with a gentle smile.

"You don't need to buy me any clothes. Once mine are clean, they should be okay." Desi said hesitantly.

"There's something going on at a club in town tomorrow night, and, if you're willing to go, I'd like to take you with me. You'll need a different style of clothing for the club." Rafe said frankly.

"But I just turned sixteen. They probably won't let me in." Desi said cautiously, looking for Rafe's reaction.

"It's a members only club. If I bring you, they'll let you in." Rafe said with certainty.

"Um, yeah. I mean, as long as no one will mind if I'm there, I'd be willing to try it." Desi said a little bit nervously.

"It will be fine. But if you find out that you don't like it there for some reason, all you'll have to do is say the word and I'll bring you back home."

"Okay, Rafe. If you like the place, I'll give it a fair chance." Desi said with a smile.

"I really think you'll like it."

A noise from the fireplace drew their attention.

The wood had shifted and one of the pieces had tumbled out onto the hearth.

"I'll get it." Desi said immediately, then picked up the fireplace tongs and expertly picked up the fallen piece of burning wood and placed it back into the grate.

"Thanks." Rafe said with a smile.

"Back home, I used to take care of the fire. Being the youngest of the kids, it was one of the few things I could do." Desi said as he stood and gazed into the fire.

"Youngest of how many?" Rafe asked with interest.

"Eleven." Desi answered distantly.

"That's a big family." Rafe said in an impressed voice.

"Too big." Desi said, as he took the poker from beside the fireplace and began to shift the logs around a little bit. "My mom used to say that her and Pa had ten kids to help on the farm, then after they thought they were all set up, the good lord blessed her with her little Dodger."

"Dodger?" Rafe asked with a smile.

"Yeah. That's what she called me." Desi said distantly, then turned to face Rafe again.

"She always treated me like I was special, I guess because I was the baby and there was five years between me and my next older sister. I think all my brothers and sisters hated me because of it. Even Pa acted like I was the most useless creature to ever walk the earth."

"But your mother always loved you." Rafe said quietly.

"Yeah. But once you get to be a certain age, that isn't enough." Desi said with a pained look at Rafe.

"So when things got so bad that you couldn't bear them anymore, you left?" Rafe asked quietly.

Desi nodded then slowly said, "We had a bad year on the farm. I mean, really bad. It seemed like every time we didn't have enough to eat or someone had to do without something, it ended up being my fault because I was the 'extra mouth' they had to feed and the 'extra body' they had to clothe. One day I just couldn't take it anymore, so I left. I hitchhiked to Columbus and... well, I guess you know the rest."

"I'm sorry you ever had to go through something like that." Rafe said honestly.

"It wasn't all bad... well, at the end it was. But there were some good things, too." Desi said quietly.

"Would you mind if I called you Dodger?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"Why?" Desi asked curiously.

"Because it's the name that was given to you by someone who loved you. Maybe if I call you Dodger, you could see yourself as the special person that your mother saw."

"You really want to do that?" Desi asked in wonder.

Rafe nodded, then quietly said, "Also, every time I call you Desi, I think of Ricky Riccardo."

Desi broke into laughter at the admission, then in a very bad fake accent he called out, "Lucy! I'm home."

Rafe smiled at the poor imitation, then in a quiet but serious voice he said, "Yes, Dodger. You are."

Chapter 2

Dodger opened his eyes and felt more peace and contentment than ever before in his life.

He lay for a moment, just appreciating the beauty of his surroundings.

The room was elegant, decorated in a mix of dark hardwood furniture and light airy fabrics.

Sunlight flooding into the room through the two large windows made it seem almost other-worldly. Like the perfect life that was eventually found in fairy tales by those deserving few who weathered their nightmarish trials.

The bed that he had slept in was the most comfortable that he had ever experienced. And the blankets that were covering him were as warm as his mother's hugs, but as soft as a flower petal.

He could even detect a pleasant faint scent that might possibly be flowers.

Dodger puzzled over that for a moment, because there weren't any flowers in the room. But when he noticed his clothes, neatly folded and stacked on the dresser, he realized that it was probably the scent of the laundry soap.

There was a part of Dodger that wanted to stay and enjoy the decadent luxury of spending the entire morning in bed, but there was a larger part of him that wanted to get up and explore the house to find out what other treasures it held.

He reluctantly got out of the huge, comfortable, wonderful, warm bed.

After a quick trip to the bathroom, Dodger selected some of his better clothes and got dressed.

He took a few minutes to put the rest of the clothes away in the closet and dresser, then spread up the bed, so that the room would continue to be the beautiful, magical place that he had awakened to.

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Dodger walked down the stairs and was surprised at how dark it was. A glance confirmed that all the windows were fully covered by heavy drapes.

After a moment to consider, Dodger decided that even though the living room was dark, it wasn't the least bit unwelcoming.

He supposed that the living room had it's own sort of magical quality and that it was nice because it wasn't something nearly so transitory. A little thing like the time of day wouldn't change it in the slightest.

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Dodger walked into the kitchen and puzzled over what he should do for breakfast.

From a very young age, his mother had shown him how to cook, depending on his help in the kitchen while his brothers and sisters were out doing the heavier labor on the farm.

But since this wasn't his family home, he felt funny about poking through cabinets and cooking, possibly making a mess in Rafe's kitchen.

Finally his stomach cast the deciding vote and Dodger made himself some eggs and toast.

After taking a few bites of his breakfast, he took a drink of orange juice and nearly choked.

His first thought was that the orange juice had spoiled, but after a moment he realized that the taste wasn't of something gone bad.

He hesitantly took another sip of the juice and tried to identify what he was tasting.

The juice had a metallic, sort of coppery twang. It was slightly sweet and had a certain thickness to it that Dodger was sure he didn't like.

All of a sudden the memory came back to him. Just after he arrived, Rafe had told him that he would probably want to avoid the juice in the glass pitcher.

Dodger poured the rest of his juice down the sink, glad that he had only gotten a small glass of it.

He went to the refrigerator to get something else to drink and spotted the bottles of Coke that Rafe had purchased for him the night before.

As he popped off the top, he could almost hear his mother's voice chiding him that sodas were no good for him and a waste of hard earned money.

But one drink of the ice cold Coke was enough to set aside any nutritional concerns.

Dodger took another long drink, then went back to the kitchen table to finish his breakfast.

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After washing the breakfast dishes, Dodger decided that it was time to do some exploring.

Yes, a small voice, strangely like his mother's, was telling him that he was in someone else's house and it wasn't proper for him to go snooping around.

But Rafe had said something the previous night about him exploring. So he sort of had permission.

He decided that the easiest way to explore would be to go from door to door, looking in all the rooms to see if he could identify what they were.

His first stop revealed a huge room beside the kitchen that was a very formal looking dining room. The table looked big enough to comfortably seat at least twenty people.

There were hutches and cabinets around the edges of the room that housed a seemingly endless supply of silver, crystal and fine china.

Dodger was shaking his head in wonder as he walked out of the dining room and on to the next room.

* * * * *

Books.

Hundreds, no thousands. Possibly tens of thousands. Shelf after shelf, each one completely filled with books. And each shelf was so tall that a ladder was needed to reach the upper half of it.

Dodger walked deeper into the room, drawn by the sirens call of all that knowledge just waiting for him to discover it.

He had the sensation of walking through a forest of tall trees. He was so dwarfed by the phenomenal shelves that he felt insignificant.

But even so, he continued on until he could verify that there eventually was an end to the enormous room.

If he ever had the urge to do some reading, it looked as if there would be no shortage of reading material. However, he might need to remember to pack a lunch if he were going to set off in search of one particular book.

* * * * *

The next room was surprising in it's absolute normalcy.

It was an office, a study.

Dodger walked in and looked around curiously, careful not to touch anything.

There was a large desk which dominated one side of the room. On the other side there were two chairs and a small sofa grouped around a coffee table.

As he was about to leave, something caught Dodger's eye.

He walked behind the desk and looked carefully at the diploma that was hanging on the wall.

Two things stood out to him, obscuring all else.

The first thing was that the Diploma was awarded by The Harvard School of Medicine, and the second was the name.

'...presented to Raphael Montgomery Killian.'

Dodger smiled to himself as he walked out of the study. He didn't know why, but knowing Rafe's full name made him happy.

* * * * *

"Dr. Raphael Killian." Dodger said to himself as he walked past the huge double doors that opened to the outside.

He continued on and noticed a small door under the curved staircase. He had expected it to be a coat closet or possibly a place to store cleaning supplies. But what he found was a staircase that led down to the basement.

Dodger felt around for a moment and finally found a light switch.

The staircase was narrow and the steps seemed to be a little bit steeper than usual.

Dodger unsteadily made his way down the steps and froze in place when he reached the bottom of the stairs.

The basement was huge.

That was to be expected, with the size of the house above.

But what he hadn't expected was that the entire, huge basement was empty except for a crude heavy wooden chair in the middle of the room.

The walls and the concrete floor were all painted white, though they seemed to be an eerie off-white in the florescent lighting.

His own breathing and the faint hum of the lights were the only sounds in the huge, cavernous space.

Dodger looked around and finally spotted a door, so plain and nondescript that he almost missed it.

He walked to the door and the sounds of his footsteps slightly echoed and came back to him as a 'plinky' sound.

When he finally reached the door, he opened it slowly, not knowing what he expected to find.

It turned out to be nothing more interesting than the furnace and hot water heater.

But looking back at the huge empty basement gave Dodger a creepy feeling that crawled up his spine on icy little legs.

The creepy feeling propelled him back across the room and up the stairs as fast as his legs would carry him.

Dodger wasn't sure if he had even taken a single breath until the basement door was closed firmly behind him.

The discovery of the basement had effectively brought his exploration to an end. Dodger hurried upstairs to the relative safety and security of his bedroom, which had offered him so much comfort the night before.

* * * * *

Dodger woke and looked around with confusion.

He sat up on the bed and looked around the room, still feeling half asleep.

From the light outside the window, he estimated that it must be after noon, meaning that he must have slept for hours.

He remembered lying down on the bed to think about all the new developments in his life and must have dropped off to sleep immediately.

A sound from downstairs drew his attention and he cautiously got off the bed and quietly left the room to investigate.

* * * * *

"You must be Dodger." An elderly woman said with delight as soon as he walked into the kitchen.

"Yes Ma'am." Dodger said shyly.

"I'm Mrs. Lewellyn. Dr. Killian called me last night to let me know that he had a guest staying with him, so I thought I'd stop by and drop off a few things to get you by until I do the regular shopping on Tuesday." She said pleasantly.

"Oh, um. Thanks." Dodger said uncertainly, still feeling somewhat sleep fogged.

"It looks like I woke you. Why don't you sit down at the table. I brought sticky buns for you. I know that Dr. Killian isn't particularly fond of sweets, but I thought you might enjoy them." Mrs. Lewellyn said cheerfully.

Before Dodger could take the three steps to the table, Mrs. Lewellyn already had two sticky buns on a small plate and sitting on the table waiting for him.

"Would you like some milk to go with that?" Mrs. Lewellyn asked pleasantly.

"Um, yes. Thank you." Dodger said as he slowly took his seat.

"I think it's wonderful that Dr. Killian has someone visiting. I worry about him being up here all alone." Mrs. Lewellyn said as she placed a small glass of milk on the table.

"Do you like pot roast?" Mrs. Lewellyn asked as she went back to work taking things from shopping bags and putting them away in the cupboards.

"Yeah. sure." Dodger said before taking a cautious bite of one of the sticky buns.

The pastry was sticky and sweet and nearly melted in his mouth.

"Good. When I do the cleaning on Tuesday, I generally make a meal and leave it for Dr. Killian to enjoy when he gets home from work." Mrs. Lewellyn said pleasantly.

After Dodger swallowed, he said, "This is really good. Did you make it?"

"Oh no, I just stopped by the bakery on the way up here and when I saw them I couldn't resist." She said fondly. "Do you like fruit punch?"

"Um, yeah." Dodger said before taking another bite of the outrageously good sweet roll.

"Good. I got you a few cans of Hi-C. I think it's much healthier than those sodas you young folk are so fond of." She said absently as she carefully folded a brown paper bag.

"Thank you for doing all of this for me. I really appreciate it." Dodger said sincerely.

"Think nothing of it. I suppose that since my husband retired, I'm looking for any excuse to get out of the house for a few minutes. Besides, I wouldn't have been able to enjoy my weekend knowing that Dr. Killian had a guest and might not have enough food in store to be a proper host." Mrs. Lewellyn said absently, then turned to Dodger and said, "You know, I worry about that boy."

"I can see that you take very good care of him." Dodger said gently, appreciating the warmth and caring she obviously felt for Rafe.

"I'd better be getting home soon. My husband worries about me making this long drive." Mrs. Lewellyn said as she gathered the empty shopping bags. "But I bought a few sticky buns for him too. So I doubt that he'll have any complaints about me making an extra trip this week."

"Thank you again for the sticky buns. They're really good." Dodger said as he stood.

"It just warms my heart to see you enjoying them." Mrs. Lewellyn said as she started walking toward the laundry room.

* * * * *

Dodger followed her on out to the garage, and watched as she got into her car.

Suddenly, the garage door started to open all by itself, and Dodger looked around in wonder.

The sound led him to finally find the garage door opener.

No one he knew, or had ever met, could even afford to have a garage, much less a garage door opener.

He looked up just in time to see Mrs. Lewellyn waving at him as she backed the car out of the garage.

Dodger smiled at the friendly gesture and returned the wave. Then he noticed her pointing a small device above him and pressing a button with her thumb.

The garage door began to close again, all on it's own.

Dodger stood and watched until the garage door had finally come to rest.

As he was about to go back into the house, he noticed that there was another side door near the front of the garage.

He walked over and unlocked it, then opened it to find that it led outside.

Dodger walked out into the chilly afternoon sunlight and looked around at his surroundings.

There was nothing but trees and low, rolling hills as far as the eye could see in every direction.

He looked at the driveway that led away from the house, but it was obscured by trees and bushes not more than fifty feet away.

There was no sign of any roads or other buildings.

When Rafe had said that he lived outside of town, Dodger naturally assumed that he meant that he lived in one of the small communities that had formed outside Columbus.

Dodger began to smile. Even though this didn't look like his family's home back in West Virginia, it was still beautiful and natural and... well, not the city.

The chilly autumn air finally convinced him that it was time to go back inside.

* * * * *

"Dodger?" Rafe called as he walked into the kitchen.

"I'm in the living room."

Rafe walked into the living room and smiled at the sight of Dodger sitting in one of the wing backed chairs, reading a book. "How was your day?"

"I slept through most of it. But it was good." Dodger said as he placed a felt bookmark into the book and sat it aside.

"I was worried that you'd be bored out of your mind." Rafe said with a chuckle.

"With the library that you have? Not likely." Dodger said as he stood.

"Well, if you're ready to go, we could go do that clothes shopping now, so you'll have something to wear to the club." Rafe said cautiously.

"Sure. Let me go up and get my coat and shoes, then I'll be ready." Dodger said with a smile.

Before he could reach the staircase, he turned to Rafe and said, "I'm glad you're home. I missed you."

"I missed you, too." Rafe said with a smile of contentment.

* * * * *

Since it was so late in the autumn, the afternoon daylight had nearly given way to evening by the time they left the house.

Once they were out on the road, Rafe said, "So you found the library, did you have a chance to look around the rest of the house?"

"Yeah. At least most of the downstairs. The basement was kind of creepy, so I gave up after that." Dodger said shyly.

Rafe glanced at him with surprise at the statement, then said, "I used to have a lab down there. But I haven't been down there in years. What about it bothered you?"

"I don't know. It was just creepy, that's all." Dodger said uncomfortably.

"Well, if you can think of another use for it, we could do something with it." Rafe said slowly, "It seems like a waste to let all that space go unused."

"Yeah." Dodger said, relieved that Rafe wasn't upset that he had been snooping. "I'll let you know if I think of anything."

"Have you thought about what else you'd like to do this weekend?" Rafe asked casually.

"No. I meant to, but when I sat down on my bed to think for a few minutes, I fell asleep." Dodger said shyly.

Rafe chuckled, then said, "You must have needed the sleep."

Dodger slowly nodded.

"Have you thought about calling your family and letting them know that you're safe?" Rafe asked hesitantly.

"No." Dodger said immediately, then added, "They don't have a phone. But even if they did, I wouldn't call them."

Rafe slowly nodded, then quietly said, "Please think about getting in touch with them, even if it's just a postcard. As you get older, you'll come to realize how important family can be and you might regret holding on to the hurt for so long."

"I'll think about it." Dodger reluctantly agreed.

Rafe smiled at him, then turned his attention back to the road.

"What about you? Do you have a family?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Yes. But I don't speak to them very often. The last time I heard from my parents, they were somewhere in central Europe." Rafe said quietly.

"Any brothers or sisters?" Dodger asked as he turned more in his seat to face Rafe.

"No. I'm an only child." Rafe said, sounding regretful.

"That sounds nice." Dodger said frankly.

"I suppose it would, to someone coming from a large family." Rafe said with a grin.

"I guess it's true that the grass is always greener on the other side." Dodger said as he directed his attention to the meandering road as it wound its way through a seemingly endless sea of trees.

"Yes. But I think dwelling on 'what might have been' can become it's own obsession. It's better to focus on the here and now." Rafe said distantly.

"Well, from my point of view, the here and now is pretty incredible. So I don't mind paying it my full attention." Dodger said with a grin.

Rafe smiled at Dodger's comment and the contentment could clearly be seen in his eyes.

"Oh, I met Mrs. Lewellyn today." Dodger said suddenly.

"You did? She usually comes on Tuesdays." Rafe said with surprise.

"Yeah. She said that she was worried that with two of us, there wouldn't be enough food for us to make it until Tuesday."

Rafe chuckled, then said, "We could probably get by for a month on all the food she has stocked in that kitchen. But she does a fine job of keeping everything I could possibly want on hand."

"She seemed really nice." Dodger said quietly, "She's been worried about you."

"She has?" Rafe asked as he glanced at Dodger.

"Yes. From what she said, I think she's noticed how lonely you are." Dodger said honestly.

"I don't know how that could be. I haven't spoken to her in person for... it must be close to two years now." Rafe said reflectively.

"It's probably because when she goes to clean the house, she can see that it's just you there." Dodger said thoughtfully, then added, "Anyway, I'm here now, so she's happy."

Rafe slowed the car, then turned on to a cross street.

"It's going to be a little while before we go to dinner. Do you think you can hold out for a few hours, or would you like to get a quick snack when we get into town?" Rafe asked casually.

After considering for a moment, Dodger finally said, "I had lunch kind of late, so I think I'll be fine."

"Well, just let me know if you get hungry. In fact, I have a ham sandwich in my briefcase if you're hungry now." Rafe said casually.

"No thanks. I'm fine." Dodger said with a warm smile.

Rafe nodded that he had heard as he concentrated on the road before him.

"Do you always carry an extra sandwich with you?" Dodger asked curiously.

"'Yes." Rafe said simply.

Dodger waited for a moment, but when no explanation was forthcoming, he finally gave in and asked, "Why?"

"Because sometimes I have to work late and don't have time to go out and get something to eat. I make myself two sandwiches in the morning, one for lunch and one for dinner." Rafe said casually.

"Does that happen often? I mean, do you have to work late a lot?" Dodger asked with concern.

"Not so much, right now, but I expect to be busier in the coming months, so it'll probably start to happen more often," Rafe said thoughtfully.

"What kind of a doctor are you?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Well, I'm an MD, but I specialize in infectious diseases." Rafe said casually.

"Oh, and since it's getting cold, there's going to be more colds and flus going around." Dodger speculated.

"That's right. But the majority of those cases will be the garden variety of whatever flu variant is going around this year. I'll be called in when it's something out of the ordinary." Rafe said seriously.

"Wow. That sounds really important." Dodger said in wonder.

"Well, yes. I suppose it is." Rafe said with a glance and a smile at Dodger.

"It must be great to be able to help people like that. I mean, to know, to really know, that you're helping people has to be the best kind of job that you could ever have." Dodger said distantly.

"Are you interested in becoming a doctor, someday?" Rafe asked curiously.

"Are you kidding? I never even finished school. There's no way I could ever do something like that." Dodger said seriously.

"Why not? I think you're smart enough. You left school, you can go back." Rafe said simply.

"I didn't exactly leave. My Pa pulled me out of school two years ago, because he said that he needed me to work on the farm." Dodger said bitterly.

"Does that mean you didn't want to leave?" Rafe asked curiously.

"No. But I wasn't going to go against Pa." Dodger said frankly, then quietly added, "Neither was the school."

Rafe's expression of concern prompted Dodger to explain, "Pa used to say that once you learned to read and write and cypher that you were wasting time sitting on your ass when you should be working if you tried to learn anything more."

"Well, if you're interested, I can look into what alternatives are available to you to receive an education," Rafe said seriously.

"But wouldn't I be older than all the other kids?" Dodger asked quietly.

"Don't worry about it, now, Dodger. Let me do some checking, and when I have some options for you, we can sit down and discuss it." Rafe said gently.

"Okay. Thanks Rafe." Dodger said past the lump in his throat.

He was overwhelmed by the possibility of getting back something he thought had been taken away forever; His future.

Dodger suddenly realized that, with Rafe's help and encouragement, anything WAS possible. He could be anything, do anything.

"Are you alright?" Rafe asked with concern.

"Yeah. Great." Dodger said as he tried to discretely wipe away his tears.

At Rafe's incredulous expression, Dodger chuckled and said, "I never thought there would be a way that I could finish high school, much less go to college. I've just been accepting that that's the way things are for me and that nothing could ever change it. But then I meet you and... it's like you blow through the problems like they were never there."

"It's not just me. You're going to have to do your part, too." Rafe said seriously.

"Just tell me what I have to do, and I'll do it." Dodger said immediately.

"Well, while I'm investigating the possibilities that are available to you, it would be a great help if you could dream about what you want to do with your new found opportunities." Rafe finished with a smile.

"You want me to dream?" Dodger asked with a grin.

Rafe's look became a little more serious as he said, "From the look of it, you've given up on some of your dreams, because you thought they weren't possible. Now that things have changed, your job is going to be to revive those dreams and decide which one you really want to pursue."

"I could just try to do them all." Dodger said playfully. "I think I'd make a pretty good 'astronaut-fireman-brain surgeon-rock and roll singer'."

Rafe chuckled and said, "I'm sure you'll be the best 'astronaut-fireman-brain surgeon-rock and roll singer' in all of Ohio, if that's what you decide you want to do."

* * * * *

The night air was getting cold and Dodger clutched his thin jacket tightly around him as they walked from the side street where they had parked, to a small strip of shops.

Dodger had expected Rafe to take him to a big store for his new clothes, but instead, he found himself being led into a little shop that didn't seem to be much bigger than a newsstand.

"Dr. Killian, it's good to see you again." the store clerk said happily.

"Hello, George. This is Dodger. I'd like to take him to the club with me tonight. Can you help him?" Rafe asked hopefully.

George looked at Dodger appraisingly for a moment, then slowly said, "Yes. I should be able to have something suitable for him in time."

Rafe smiled and looked a little bit relieved at the announcement, then he asked, "Do you think you'll be able to outfit him with everything else he'll need?"

"Yes. I think so. Just let me get some measurements, then you might consider a stop at the salon." George said hesitantly.

Rafe turned to look at Dodger, then quietly asked, "What would you think about getting a haircut while George works on your suit?"

"Yeah, sure." Dodger said without concern.

Rafe smiled at his easy acceptance, then nodded at George to begin.

"Just hold still while George measures you so that the clothes will fit properly." Rafe said quietly.

"Yeah. No problem." Dodger said casually, then jumped a little when George measured his inseam. "Whoa. Hello, George."

"I'm sorry, did I startle you?" George asked as he quickly wrote down the measurements.

"A little, but I just didn't know you were going to measure, um, that." Dodger said shyly.

"Would you like to see the different styles that are available?" George asked courteously.

Rafe chuckled and said, "No, George. I trust your sense of style a lot more than my own."

George smiled warmly at the compliment, then said, "I'll have it ready as soon as possible. Stop by after the salon and I'll be able to give you an estimate of when it will be finished."

"We'll do that. Thanks for taking care of us, George," Rafe said happily, then gestured toward the door, indicating that he was ready to leave.

* * * * *

"Is George the one who makes your suits?" Dodger asked as they walked out into the chilly night air.

"Yes. I was being honest about his sense of style. George has never steered me wrong." Rafe said sincerely.

"Well, I like the way your suits look, so I'm sure that mine will look good too." Dodger said happily.

"There's a hair salon across the street, on the corner. Come on." Rafe said quickly, then, seeing a break in the light traffic, he darted across the street.

Dodger broke into a run to keep up with Rafe.

He started to laugh once he was safely on the sidewalk on the other side.

Rafe smiled at Dodger's happiness and didn't notice the figure who was watching from the shadows in the alley ahead.

* * * * *

As Rafe and Dodger walked, a burley man stepped out of the alley and directly into their path.

"Give me your money." He said as he held a knife inches from Rafe's chest.

"No." Rafe said simply.

"You won't miss a few bucks." the man said as he moved closer. "It'd be a shame for that pretty face of yours to get cut."

Dodger noticed the expression on Rafe's face. It appeared that he wasn't the least bit afraid.

The man brought his arm up, apparently ready to slash at Rafe's face with the knife, but he never got the chance.

In a move that was too fast for Dodger to follow, Rafe grabbed the man by the face with one hand, then swung him around, until the back of his head hit the brick wall with a 'smack'.

Dodger's eyes went wide. He couldn't believe that Rafe was strong enough to throw his attacker around like a rag doll. He turned his attention to Rafe and looked at him with question.

"Come on, let's go get your hair cut." Rafe said, then started walking away from the alley.

"But what about him?" Dodger asked, looking at the burley man laying crumpled on the ground against the wall.

"He can get his own haircut. Come on." Rafe said playfully.

Dodger blinked, then blinked again.

Finally he said, "Um, yeah. Let's go."

Chapter 3

Dodger was still a little bit dazed when Rafe led him into a very nice hair salon.

"Rafe, darling. It's so good to see you!" An elegant looking lady said with delight as she raced up to him and pulled him into a quick hug.

"Hello, Lily." Rafe said warmly, then pulled away slightly and said, "I'd like for you to meet Dodger."

"Hello Dodger. It's very nice to meet you." Lily said with a joyful smile.

"It's nice to meet you, too, Lily." Dodger said carefully.

"What can I do for you this evening, Rafe?" Lily asked pleasantly.

"I'd like to take Dodger out to the club tonight and I was wondering if you could help me out." Rafe asked hopefully.

"I think we can do that." Lily said happily.

Rafe moved a little closer to Lily, and Dodger barely heard him whisper, "And I left a little mess in the alley."

Lily nodded, then smiled at Dodger and said, "If you'll take a seat in the chair over there, I'll be right with you."

Dodger nodded, then watched as Lily dashed into the back room.

"Do you trust me, Dodger?" Rafe asked quietly.

Dodger was taken aback by the question and responded with a quick nod.

"Good, then go ahead and sit down." Rafe said gently and gestured to the empty styling chair.

Dodger slowly walked to the chair and took a seat.

"Are you okay?" Rafe asked with concern.

"I'm not sure." Dodger said honestly. "I mean, after that..."

Rafe nodded that he understood, then said, "It's over, now. Just don't worry about it."

Dodger nervously nodded, then did his best to relax back in the chair.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry that took so long." Lily said as she walked back into the room, drying her hands on a towel. "Did you already have something in mind?"

"Dodger already said that he trusts me, so I'm going to leave it in your capable hands. Just get him ready for the club." Rafe said with a smile.

"Can I assume that you've just been to visit George?" Lily asked curiously.

"That's right." Rafe said with a smile.

"Then I think I know just what Dodger needs." Lily said happily as she moved behind his chair.

"Just relax, Dodger. Lily will take good care of you." Rafe said assuringly.

Dodger looked into Rafe's eyes, then broke into a smile.

"Good." Rafe said gently.

* * * * *

"How do you feel?" Rafe asked as they walked out of the salon.

"I can't believe how much difference a haircut can make. I feel wonderful." Dodger said happily, then remembered where they were and looked cautiously toward the alley.

"He's gone. Don't worry about it." Rafe said quietly.

Dodger nodded, and almost missed it when Rafe took off running across the street.

After a moment of hesitation, Dodger quickly followed.

* * * * *

When they walked into the tailor's shop, the bell ringing alerted George to their presence.

"I'm nearly finished. If you'll come back, we can get started." George said from the doorway to the back room.

Rafe guided Dodger to walk through the little shop and into the back room.

"You can start with these while I finish this hem." George said as he handed Dodger a neatly folded pile of clothing which appeared to be all the undergarments that he would need.

Dodger looked at the clothes, then at Rafe with question.

"Go behind that curtain and change into these things. George will hand you things as he finishes with them." Rafe explained carefully.

Dodger nodded, then walked behind the curtain.

* * * * *

As Dodger started to undress, his mind was racing over and over the events of the past two days.

It felt like he had pieces of a puzzle, and no matter how many times and how many different ways he tried to put them together, nothing fit.

"Give him these." he heard George say from beyond the curtain.

A moment later, Rafe's hand appeared through the curtain, holding out the pair of charcoal gray pants that George had been working on.

"Thanks." Dodger said as he accepted the pants.

As soon as he had them, the hand withdrew.

Dodger paused for a moment and smiled to himself. A lot of things were wrong and weird and out of place, but the one thing that he could trust, that he could absolutely depend on, was that Rafe cared for him. In the light of that caring, all the rest was incidental.

* * * * *

"Is this right?" Dodger asked as he stepped out from behind the curtain.

"It looks good, so far." Rafe said as he looked at the fit of the pants from the front and behind.

"Here, put this on while I look." George said as he handed a starched and pressed white button down shirt to Dodger.

As Dodger slipped on the shirt, he noticed that George was moving around his legs, adjusting and tugging to see that everything fit correctly.

"Yes, yes." George finally said with approval, then stood again.

He looked at Dodger, then at Rafe and asked, "Do you think he could manage the zebra stripes?"

"We could try it." Rafe said noncommittally.

"Here." George said as he handed Rafe a black vest, then rushed out to the front of the shop.

Dodger was buttoning up the vest as George returned.

"Here you go, Dodger. Try this on." George said as he handed him a zebra striped necktie.

"Um, I don't know how to tie one of these." Dodger admitted reluctantly.

"Let me." Rafe said and held out his hand for the tie.

"Remind me later, and I'll show you how to do it for yourself." Rafe said as he draped the tie around his neck and tied it in a few quick moves.

"Um, yeah." Dodger said with astonishment at how easy he made it look.

"Here you go." Rafe said as he pulled the tied necktie off over his head and handed it to Dodger.

"Thanks." Dodger said, then slipped it on over his own head.

After a few seconds of working the tie under the starched collar of the shirt, he finally got it in the proper place and pulled on the knot to tighten it.

"He's going to need cuff links and a tie clip." George said before revving up his sewing machine to work on the suit jacket.

"Yes. I thought of that. I brought some from home." Rafe said, as he reached into the pocket of his overcoat.

"I've never used cuff links before." Dodger said cautiously.

"They take some getting used to, but they really do look nice." Rafe said as he opened a small jewelry box.

"Give me your arm and I'll put this on you."

Dodger offered his arm, then watched as Rafe attached the shiny cuff link.

When Rafe was finished, Dodger offered his other arm as he held up the first to examine the cuff link.

He smiled at the sight of the tiny golden elephant.

"All done. If you'll hold still, I'll put the tie clip in place." Rafe said gently.

Dodger made a conscious effort to keep still as he looked at the other cuff link.

To his surprise, it wasn't another elephant. This one was a tiny golden tiger.

"Here, I think this should do you." George said as he stood and held out a suit jacket to Rafe.

"Thanks, George." Rafe said gratefully, then handed the jacket to Dodger.

"Thanks." Dodger whispered, then slipped it on.

"Lift your foot." George said seriously.

Dodger looked down to see George on the floor with a device that looked like the second cousin of a slide rule.

"Just relax. I'm measuring your foot to make sure you get the right size of shoes." George said as he concentrated on the reading on the device.

"Oh, um. Thanks." Dodger said, starting to feel overwhelmed again.

"Would you button your jacket?" Rafe asked gently.

"Yeah." Dodger responded, then buttoned it up.

Rafe took a step back and looked at Dodger appraisingly for a moment, then shook his head.

"The zebra stripes aren't right." Rafe said regretfully.

George walked to Rafe's side and looked for a moment, then said, "I have just the thing."

"How are you doing, Dodger?" Rafe asked gently.

"Honestly? I don't know. I feel like I'm going three directions at once." Dodger said helplessly.

"Well, the good news is that the hard part is almost over. Once we're done here, all you have to do is enjoy the night." Rafe said gently.

Dodger didn't look convinced, but nodded his head in agreement.

"Here we are. If you'll take care of the tie, I'll take care of the shoes." George said as he knelt on the floor again.

"Take off that tie while I tie this one." Rafe said gently.

It took a few seconds for Dodger to figure out how to undo the tie clip, but after that, getting the tie off took no time at all.

"Lift your foot." George said from below him as Rafe handed him the blue tie.

Dodger started to giggle at the absurdity of his position.

Rafe smiled at him warmly, and waited for him to get the tie into place.

"I think we're almost there." Rafe said as he stood back again.

Dodger fastened the tie clip at the same time as he lifted his other foot for George to put his second shoe on.

"Are you sure about the color of the jacket, George?" Rafe asked slowly.

George suddenly stopped everything he was doing, then slowly turned to look at Rafe.

"I'm just kidding, George. It looks great." Rafe said as he tried to restrain his chuckles.

"Dodger, walk around for me and see if those shoes feel comfortable." George said as he got to his feet.

After a grin at Rafe for the joke he had made, Dodger walked around the back room of the tailor's shop and was surprised at how comfortable the shoes were.

"These feel great. They're better than my regular shoes." Dodger said honestly.

"Good, comfort is important." George said with satisfaction.

"Is that everything?" Rafe asked as he looked Dodger over one more time.

"Not quite." George said, then presented Dodger with an overcoat that matched the suit perfectly.

"Very nice, George. You're the best." Rafe said in an impressed voice.

"This..." George said with a gesture toward Dodger, "...is my reward."

"Mine too, George." Rafe said with a smile at Dodger.

"Well, Dodger, are you ready to see the result of all our hard work?" George asked curiously.

Dodger quickly nodded.

"Right this way." George said and ushered Dodger to the front of the shop where there was a full length mirror.

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"Oh. Wow." Dodger gasped when he saw his reflection.

His dark hair with it's new style seemed to be a perfect match with the color and style of the suit..

The midnight blue tie brought out the dark hue of blue in his eyes, drawing attention to them.

"I think that says it all." Rafe said with a smile.

"Yes. It's as fine a compliment as any I've received." George said with satisfaction.

"Well, Dodger, are you ready to go?" Rafe asked curiously.

"Um, yeah. But don't you need to pay for this?" Dodger asked hesitantly.

"George will bill me." Rafe said casually, then turned to George and said, "Thanks for your hard work, George. You're a miracle worker."

"It was my pleasure." George said graciously.

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"This worked out perfectly. We're going to arrive at the club right on time." Rafe said happily as he led the way down the sidewalk.

"So where are we going next?" Dodger asked curiously as he held the bundle of his regular clothes in his arms.

"To the car so I can drive us to the club." Rafe said casually.

"The car is that way." Dodger said as he pointed.

Rafe looked where Dodger was pointing, then asked, "Are you sure?"

Dodger nodded seriously.

"Alright then. Lead the way." Rafe said without concern.

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When Rafe parked the car, Dodger was somewhat disappointed by what he saw.

The place that they were in front of could be described, at best, as a seedy dive.

"Over here." Rafe said and guided Dodger to walk away from the entrance.

Dodger looked at him with question, but followed along willingly.

When they got to the side of the building, Rafe started leading them down a flight of concrete stairs to the basement.

Dodger moved a little closer to Rafe's side, not feeling at all sure about what they were doing.

"Here we are." Rafe said happily as he took a key out of his pocket.

Dodger watched as Rafe unlocked the heavy iron door.

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Once inside, Rafe made sure that the door was securely closed.

"Give me your coat." Rafe said as he took off his own overcoat.

Dodger took off his coat and handed it to Rafe.

As they walked around the corner, Dodger was surprised to see a woman standing there, smiling at them.

"Rafe, it's great to see you." She said happily.

"Hello, Imelda. This is Dodger." Rafe said warmly.

"It's very nice to meet you Dodger." She said with a warm, genuine smile.

"It's nice to meet you too, Imelda." Dodger said cautiously.

"We're not too late are we?" Rafe asked as he handed their coats to Imelda.

"No. I think they'll be ready to start in about fifteen minutes." Imelda said cheerfully, then retreated through a doorway.

She returned a moment later and handed Rafe a red token as she said, "Have a wonderful evening."

"You too." Rafe said, then gestured for Dodger to follow him.

* * * * *

"Monsieur Killian, so good to see you." An immaculately dressed man said as they approached a large, open room.

"Thank you, Rene." Rafe said with a smile. "This is Dodger, do you think you could find a table for us?"

"Oui, but of course." Rene said quickly, "Right this way."

Rafe immediately followed, but Dodger hesitated.

"Monsieur Dodger?" Rene asked gently.

"Um, yeah." Dodger said quickly, then followed.

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They were seated at a table perhaps ten feet from what looked like a stage.

"Your usual, Monsieur Killian?" Rene asked quietly.

Rafe nodded gratefully.

"And what would you like to drink, Monsieur Dodger?" Rene asked professionally.

Dodger looked at Rafe helplessly, not even knowing what his options were.

"Would you like a Coke?" Rafe asked casually.

"Yeah. That'd be great." Dodger answered immediately.

As Rene hurried away, Dodger looked at Rafe and said, "I don't have any idea of how to act or what to do."

"Just relax and be yourself." Rafe said gently. "If you want something, ask for it. If you don't understand something, just tell me and I'll explain it. The whole point of this place is that it's safe."

Dodger hesitantly looked around and noticed that everyone seemed to be comfortable and just having a good time.

His gaze stopped on a table where there was a beautiful, elegantly dressed woman sitting with two men who appeared to be identical twins, one sitting on each side of her. Both of the men were fawning over her and all three seemed to be having a wonderful time.

After a moment, Rafe followed his gaze, then said, "That's Manna and her husbands, Ernie and Blake."

"Husbands?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Yes. You don't find many examples of polyandry around here, but a good share of the members have non-standard relationships. I suppose it has something to do with the most interesting people being unwilling to conform to society's puritanical standards of behavior."

Before Dodger could think of which of many questions he wanted to ask, another waiter arrived to place their drinks on the table.

Dodger immediately noticed that Rafe had received a tall crystal glass of orange juice.

"Would you like some menus or would you like to hear the specials?" The waiter asked pleasantly.

"The specials, I think." Rafe said, then cast a questioning glance at Dodger.

A nod was Dodger's answer.

"Tonight, the chef has prepared a rack of lamb with a traditional neeps and tatties. As a counterpoint, we are also offering a porterhouse steak with a medley of late autumn vegetables. Of course, the regular menu is available if you're in the mood for something different." the waiter said professionally.

"I like the sound of the lamb, what about you Dodger?" Rafe asked casually.

"The steak sounds good to me." Dodger said timidly.

"Well, that was easy enough." Rafe said happily as he looked at the waiter.

"I hope you enjoy your evening." The waiter said, then withdrew from the table.

"I hope that was okay. I mean, since it was the special, hopefully it won't be too expensive." Dodger said nervously.

Rafe smiled at the statement, then said, "It's called a special because the chef is especially proud of the meal that he's prepared. No one here is worried about the price, they just want to enjoy the experience of a good meal in a relaxing atmosphere."

Dodger thought about it for a moment, then whispered, "That means it's REALLY expensive, doesn't it?"

"Actually, no." Rafe said honestly. "The steak you ordered is a perfect example. A porterhouse isn't the most elegant cut of meat for a restaurant to serve, mainly because it has the bone in it. But the bone, even though it's not pretty, adds flavor to the meat. So, of course we're not getting served the scraps off

the butcher's floor, but at the same time, we're not automatically getting the most expensive cut of meat, just because it's the most expensive."

Dodger slowly nodded that he understood, then thought to say, "The waiter didn't ask me how I wanted my steak cooked."

"Oh, I should have thought to tell you about that." Rafe said with a chuckle, "The chef prepares everything in the way that he feels it is best. If you have a preference, you can tell the waiter, otherwise you'll get your steak cooked in the best possible way for that cut of meat."

"Your salads." The waiter quietly said as he placed salads on the table.

"I didn't order salad." Dodger said hesitantly.

"It comes with the meal. Just enjoy it." Rafe said casually.

Dodger took a bite of the salad and his eyes went wide at the flavor of the dressing. "Hey, this is really good. What kind of dressing is this?"

"I'm sure it's something the chef made especially to go with this meal." Rafe said with a smile, then looked past Dodger as someone approached.

"Leila! Come over here. There's someone I'd like for you to meet." Rafe said as he stood.

Dodger turned and was shocked by the sight of the stunning young woman approaching their table.

He couldn't pin down her nationality from her appearance, but she might possibly be a native Hawaiian. Regardless, she was exotic and absolutely lovely. He stood, as Rafe had done, assuming that it was the polite thing to do in this circumstance.

"Dodger, I would like for you to meet Leila, an old friend of mine. Leila, I'd like for you to meet Dodger, a new friend of mine." Rafe said playfully.

"It's great to meet you Dodger." Leila said with delight twinkling in her eyes.

"It's nice to meet you too," Dodger said quietly, in awe of the beautiful woman.

She looked to Rafe and said, "I'm so glad you could come."

"I wouldn't have missed it." Rafe said gently.

"I need to get back stage, it's almost time. Just, when I saw you out here, I had to come and say hello." Leila said quickly.

"We'll be right here. Go on." Rafe said with a smile.

"Thanks." She said, then ran to his side and gave him a quick kiss on the cheek before rushing away.

Rafe chuckled at the action as he returned to his seat.

Dodger slowly sat, then looked at Rafe with question.

"We have a long history." Rafe said with a distant smile.

At Dodger's continuing questioning look, Rafe added, "Our parents arranged for us to be married."

Dodger's eyes went wide, then he looked back toward the stage.

"Everyone seemed to be perfectly happy with the arrangement and agreed with it, except for Leila and me." Rafe said frankly. "Neither of us wanted to be married, but it turns out that the families were right about one thing. Since the first day we met, we've always been the best of friends."

"So you haven't been married?" Dodger asked Rafe carefully.

"No. Leila was the closest I ever came to that." Rafe said uncomfortably. "I've never met anyone that I felt that way about."

Dodger nodded that he understood, then took another bite of his salad.

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The lights in the dining room dimmed as the lights on the stage went up slightly.

Leila walked onto the stage, followed by three other people. It turned out that the men following her were musicians.

After a moment for everyone to find their place, the pianist started off the music.

Soon after, the cellist and the saxophone player joined the melody.

As Leila started singing, Dodger was enthralled by the experience.

Her voice seemed to transport him. He could feel every nuance of meaning that she put into the song. It was almost as if he were there, witness to the love and pain she was describing as the song unfolded. It wasn't until the last note had faded to silence, that Dodger came back to himself. He had the feeling that he had held his breath through the entire song.

"How are you doing, Dodger?" Rafe asked quietly.

"She was amazing." Dodger said in wonder.

"I thought she would be. This is why I wanted you to come tonight." Rafe said with a smile of accomplishment.

"Thank you, Rafe. I wouldn't have wanted to miss this for anything." Dodger said honestly.

Before Rafe could respond, the music started again and Leila began to sing.

* * * * *

The applause was sincere and heartfelt from everyone in the room.

Dodger added his own clapping, hoping to convey some measure of how much he admired Leila's performance.

"She was really good." Rafe said in a voice of admiration.

"Yeah." Dodger said, not knowing what else he could say that he hadn't already said.

Rafe looked away from the table and Dodger followed his gaze.

"The chef wanted to reserve the main course until after the performance, as a courtesy to Miss Leila. I hope this hasn't caused you any inconvenience." The waiter said as he placed their food on the table.

"Please thank the chef for his courtesy. I'm sure Leila is as appreciative as we are that there were no unnecessary distractions while she was on stage." Rafe said gently.

The waiter bowed once, then withdrew from the table.

"This looks great." Dodger said as he looked at his steak.

"Yes. It does." Rafe agreed. "Dig in."

Dodger chuckled as he picked up his silverware.

"What's so funny?" Rafe asked curiously.

"We're dressed up with tie clips and cuff links and you say 'dig in'. I don't know, I just find that funny." Dodger said happily.

Rafe smiled, then said, "We dress this way because this place demands a certain level of sophistication, but no matter how I'm dressed, I'm still me. At work, I'm Dr. Killian. I am expected to behave a certain way and anything less is unacceptable. When I hang up my stethoscope for the day, I'm allowed to be a person again."

"I'm sorry, Rafe. I didn't realize that you were under so much pressure to conform. I just thought what you said was funny considering the way we're dressed." Dodger said apologetically.

"I know Dodger, and you didn't say anything wrong. I guess I've still got a few raw nerves from my job. I feel like I haven't had a break from it in years." Rafe said quietly.

"How long has it been since you've had a vacation?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"It's only been..." Rafe said as he trailed off into thought. "What year is it?"

"1971." Dodger said with a smile.

"That would make it six... no, seven years." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"Then you're past due." Dodger said firmly.

"There's no way I could take a vacation at the beginning of the winter. It's our busiest time of year." Rafe said immediately.

"Then use this time to plan." Dodger said simply. "Sometimes making the plans and getting your hopes up is almost as exciting as actually going and doing it."

"And how do you know that, oh wise one of many years?" Rafe asked playfully.

"I read." Dodger said simply.

"You got me on that one." Rafe said with a laugh.

Dodger smiled, then took a bite of his food.

"How is your steak?" Rafe asked curiously.

Dodger swallowed, then said, "Absolutely the best that I've ever tasted."

"I'm glad." Rafe said happily.

"Everything tonight has been the best. It's really like a dream." Dodger said frankly.

"I think I know what you mean." Rafe said distantly. "I'm used to all of this, but sharing it with you is kind of like seeing it for the first time all over again."

"I'm glad I could help." Dodger said with a grin.

"So am I."

Chapter 4

As Dodger was enjoying his meal, he was surprised when Rafe suddenly stood.

He followed Rafe's gaze behind him and smiled when he saw Leila approaching.

"You were wonderful." Rafe said as he walked to her and pulled her into an affectionate hug.

"Thank you." Leila said with a grateful smile.

Dodger stood as Rafe guided Leila to walk back to their table.

"You were fantastic." Dodger said honestly.

"Thank you, Dodger. I'm glad you enjoyed it." Leila said timidly.

"Would you like to join us?" Rafe asked graciously.

"Oh, I would love to, but I already promised Portia and Lily that I'd sit with them." Leila said with regret.

"I won't keep you then. But we'll have to get together soon and have dinner so we can catch up on things. It's been too long." Rafe said tenderly.

Leila giggled, then said, "I would like that, Rafe. I'll call you sometime next week."

Rafe nodded, then gave Leila a gentle kiss on the cheek before letting her go.

Leila smiled at Dodger and waved 'bye' before walking away.

"She's a special lady." Rafe said with admiration as he went back to his seat.

Dodger sat down, then hesitantly asked, "I can see how much you love her, why didn't you want to marry her?"

Rafe seemed surprised by the question and took a moment to consider before answering, "I do love her. If we had married, I'd like to think that she'd still be my best friend. But... it's hard to explain. I don't feel that way about her. She's beautiful and fun and exciting, but there's something missing. I don't feel a... chemistry with her. I don't think that there's any way that I would ever be 'in love' with her."

Dodger thought about what Rafe was saying and thought that he understood, just a little.

"Is that..." Rafe said suddenly, then stood again and motioned to someone across the room.

A moment later a well dressed black man, close to Rafe's age approached the table.

"What are you doing here? I thought you moved to Mississippi!" Rafe said happily as he hugged the man.

"I did. I'm just here for a visit." the man said as he returned the hug.

Rafe released the man from the hug, then turned and proudly said, "Dodger, I'd like for you to meet another old friend of mine, this is Holly."

The man glanced at Rafe with an expression that held both irritation and affection, before he faced Dodger again and said, "It's nice to meet you Dodger, I'm Hollis."

"It's nice to meet you Hollis." Dodger said as he stood to shake the man's hand.

"Did you get to see Leila's performance?" Rafe asked hopefully.

"Yes. She was fantastic." Hollis said with a broad smile, then quickly said, "I'm here with someone and I don't want to leave him on his own for too long."

"I understand, but if you think your friend would enjoy the company, you'd be welcomed to join us." Rafe said honestly.

Hollis thought for a moment, then carefully said, "I came back to Columbus just so I could bring Clay here. He's been fighting the good fight for a while now and I think he's starting to lose hope. I thought that being here, I don't know, maybe he could see the way that things 'could' be and it might rekindle the passion he's been losing."

"Well, sitting over there, separate from everyone else isn't going to do much to help with that. Invite him over." Rafe said insistently.

Hollis thought for a moment, then quietly said, "He doesn't know...."

"It will be fine." Rafe assured, then glanced at Dodger.

Hollis followed his glance, then seemed to come to a decision.

Dodger watched as Hollis motioned across the room and beckoned his friend to come with a gesture.

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"Rafe, Dodger, I'd like to introduce you to one of my associates from Mississippi, this is Clay." Hollis said formally.

"Clayton." The younger man in his mid twenties corrected gently.

"It's nice to meet you Clayton." Rafe said warmly, "Holly was telling us that this was your first time visiting. It's Dodger's first time too, so maybe you two can help each other deal with the new experience."

Clayton looked at Dodger appraisingly for a moment, then seemed to accept the suggestion.

Rafe noticed a waiter nearby and quickly said, "These gentlemen will be joining us."

The waiter nodded once, then rushed away.

"Please sit down and relax with us." Rafe said casually as he gestured toward the table.

"We were just about to eat..." Clayton said hesitantly.

"Here comes your food." Rafe said with a smile, then took his own seat.

Everyone else followed his example, and sat around the table as the waiter placed Clayton's and Hollis's food before them.

"So Clayton, how are you enjoying Columbus?" Rafe asked casually, then took a bite of his food.

"Well, I like what I've seen so far, but that hasn't been very much." Clayton said honestly.

"I hope Holly has time to show you around. It's a nice place." Rafe said seriously.

"Well, 'Holly' and I are just here for the weekend, so I don't know how much of a chance we'll have for sightseeing." Clayton said, unable to restrain a grin at Hollis' nickname.

"I think a weekend is just enough time." Dodger said frankly.

Rafe smiled at Dodger's willingness to join into the conversation and nodded his agreement to his statement.

Dodger turned at a movement and noticed a waiter taking away his empty glass and replacing it with a new glass of coke.

As he was taking another bite of his food, he noticed that Clayton's eyes were wide and disbelieving as he looked past him.

Dodger turned in time to see two men at the next table kissing, not passionately, but affectionately.

"Rafe said that some of the people here are in non standard relationships because interesting people tend to resist conforming to societal restrictions." Dodger said conversationally, hoping that the explanation would put Clayton at ease.

Hollis smiled and said, "I think that's a perfect way of putting it."

Clayton looked at Dodger uncertainly for a moment, then asked, "But that's... okay?"

"Why not? It's just people relaxing and being comfortable." Dodger said simply.

Rafe smiled with pride at Dodger, then added, "You know how the world is. We all try to mold and shape it to be better in our own ways. But in here, this is how we think the world should be. This is our haven where we can let go of it all and just relax in the company of friends."

Clayton took a bite of his steak, and considered as he chewed.

Finally, he looked at Dodger and quietly asked, "Are you two a couple?"

Before Dodger could answer, Rafe quietly said, "We only spoke for the first time yesterday. I don't think we know each other nearly well enough to be thinking of something like that."

Dodger nodded his agreement to Rafe's words, then added, "But I think it's nice to know that however it works out, that we'll still be able to come here."

Hollis looked from Rafe to Dodger, then back to Rafe and said, "I think that when you do know each other well enough to think about it, it could work."

Rafe glanced at Dodger to find him looking somewhat pale. With a small smile, Rafe quietly said, "That might be nice."

* * * * *

Dodger sat in the car, listening to the engine, watching the scenery pass them by, and thinking over the events of the night.

They had spent hours talking to Clayton and Hollis.

After the initial awkwardness, conversation finally started flowing more comfortably and even became pleasant.

All evening, over and over, Dodger kept coming back to the question about his relationship with Rafe.

It wasn't so much that he was against the idea, that would at least be something, he didn't know how he felt about it. And it suddenly became very important to him that he did know. If Rafe were being honest, and he always had been before, then at some future time, when they knew each other better, it would be something that they would consider.

"How are you doing, Dodger?" Rafe asked quietly.

"Um, okay." Dodger answered slowly, "I'm just thinking."

"I bet I can guess about what." Rafe said with a grin.

"How is that?" Dodger asked slowly.

"After Holly said that we could be a good couple, all the color drained out of your face. I had a feeling that you might be thinking about that later." Rafe said honestly.

"What do you think about it?" Dodger asked nervously.

"Do you mean, in general, or in regards to us specifically?" Rafe asked carefully.

"I mean, do you think you could ever do that?" Dodger asked quietly.

"If you mean, do I think I could be with a man sexually. Then the answer is yes. Because I have been... a few times. But if you're asking if I could love a man in the context of a committed relationship. I don't know. I would like to think that I could, but so far it hasn't happened." Rafe said honestly.

Dodger nodded slowly as he considered the words.

"What about you?" Rafe asked gently.

Dodger thought about playing dumb and dragging it out, but resisted the urge and answered, "I don't know why, but I think that I could love a man that way. It's the sex part I don't know about. I just don't know if I'd like that."

"Well, there's more than one thing that you can do when it comes to sex." Rafe said frankly.

"I really don't know about that. I only heard about the one thing... when the guy, you know, sticks it in your butt. And I heard that it hurts." Dodger said frankly.

"It doesn't have to." Rafe said gently.

Dodger looked at Rafe with question.

"Please just trust me when I tell you that the sex can be enjoyable. But that's only one small part of a relationship." Rafe said seriously.

Dodger slowly nodded that he had heard.

"I'm sorry the subject ever came up. I think it's too early for us to be thinking along these lines." Rafe said regretfully.

"No. I'm kind of glad that it did come up." Dodger said thoughtfully.

At Rafe's look of question, he continued, "When we were talking about school, you said that I needed to dream about the future that I wanted. I'm pretty sure that whatever future I'm dreaming about, you're going to be part of it. So I think it's good that I have this to think about, so I can decide if it's something I'd like to try. I mean, if you wanted to, too."

Rafe thought for a moment, then said, "I tell you what, Dodger. I think I'm going to be doing some dreaming too, so when the day comes that you're ready to talk about this again, I'll have a better sense of my own feelings on the matter."

"Thanks for talking to me about this, Rafe." Dodger said quietly. "I was feeling really nervous about it before, but now I feel okay."

"As long as you're willing to talk, I'll always be here to discuss things with you." Rafe said sincerely.

* * * * *

It was late when they arrived back at the house, so Rafe and Dodger said their goodnights and went to their separate rooms.

As Dodger changed out of his suit, he reflected on the past two days.

On the one hand, he had the weirdness that seemed to surround Dr. Raphael Montgomery Killian. The list of things that were 'off' or just plain 'wrong' was getting to be a long one.

But on the other hand, there was the man himself, Rafe, who was such a gentle and loving soul. Not only was he a loving person, but all the people who knew him seemed to love him and were devoted to him.

Dodger finally decided that the two hands cancelled each other out, leaving him with only his heart to decide.

And what his heart was telling him was that Rafe wanted him here. And that Rafe was someone he would be able to depend on... today, tomorrow and forever. His heart wasn't saying anything at all about love. But it was speaking volubly about Rafe's goodness, loyalty and decency.

Dodger stepped into the shower and marveled at the sense of peace that he was feeling as the warm water seemed to wash away the last of his tension.

His hands moved automatically, soaping him as he drifted in the tranquil place between thought and feeling.

He felt a tingle of desire creep through his body as one of his hands started paying extra attention to his slowly awakening manhood.

Dodger tried to set aside the 'dirty' feeling that usually came with this action.

As far back as he could remember, his brothers and sisters had always taken great delight in teasing and taunting him about 'playing with himself'. For most of his life, he didn't even know what they were talking about, only that they were being cruel.

When he was eleven, he woke up one night as two of his brothers were 'messing around' in the room that all the boys shared. He had silently watched as they started out each doing their own, then eventually each other. Dodger was amazed by the spectacle, because their erections were so huge compared to his own. Of course, he knew now that this was because Danny was 22 years old and Duncan was 20. But at the time he had felt so small and inadequate because his little bone barely measured over 3 inches.

After that night, Dodger slept very lightly and woke immediately when his brothers started fooling around. At one time or another over the course of the next few years he had eventually seen all his brothers engaged in the activity at least once.

As he absently pumped his erection, he thought to himself, 'Why was it supposed to be wrong for me and not for them?'.

A part of him had always wanted to go over there and be with them. To touch them. To be a part of this thing that was supposed to be so forbidden. But he always knew that it could never happen.

His brothers hated him. If they ever found out that he was watching or that he had the slightest interest in what they were doing... he didn't want to think about what horrible things they would have come up with to torture him.

Dodger's hand started to move faster as his mind moved on to more pleasant thoughts.

An image of Rafe filled his mind's eye. He was standing there, dressed in his business suit, looking friendly and warm and... safe.

Dodger wondered that, if the day ever came when they decided that they wanted to be together, what would he do?

He had only seen his brothers masturbate themselves and each other. If that was something that Rafe would enjoy, he could certainly do that.

Truth be told, it's something he had always wanted to try with someone else.

And when he had told Rafe about the thing the runaway kids had said about sticking a dick up your butt, Rafe had said that it didn't have to be painful.

Dodger thought about how he felt about that.

Having a part of Rafe, touch him like that. Having a part of Rafe inside him. Rafe breathing heavily and thrusting and shooting his cream...

"Rafe." Dodger whispered, tilting his head back as his semen flew. The climax seemed to freeze time and held him in a moment of perfect bliss. Dodger pictured how beautiful Rafe would be while he was having his own climax.

His pumping hand slowed and finally stopped.

Dodger fought to get his breathing under control as he turned away from the shower to protect his, now, super-sensitive glans from the shower's spray. The warm water spraying on his neck and shoulders began to do it's work to relax him.

He pondered for a moment just what he was feeling.

Usually after pleasuring himself, Dodger felt a sense of failure, that he hadn't been able to resist it, and shame for even wanting to do it at all. But this time was different. Somehow, Rafe made it all better. He knew without a doubt that Rafe wouldn't be disgusted with what he had done, and that Rafe wouldn't tease or belittle him for having done it.

Dodger seemed to come back to himself, then made sure to rinse himself off well before getting out of the shower.

As he dried himself, it occurred to him that by some process that he wasn't consciously aware of, he had come to a decision.

When the time came for him to talk with Rafe about their relationship, somehow he would find the courage to admit that he really did want for them to become a couple.

* * * * *

Dodger slid his naked body between cool sheets and rested back in the large comfortable bed.

Even though so many things had happened in the past 48 hours, the only things he seemed to be able to think about were Rafe's beautiful eyes, his slender hands, his handsome face...

* * * * *

"Good morning, Dodger. Did you sleep well?" Rafe asked casually when he saw Dodger walking down the stairs.

"The best ever." Dodger said with a contented smile.

"Good." Rafe said happily.

"What about you? How did you sleep?" Dodger asked as he took a seat in the wing backed chair, next to Rafe's.

"Exceptionally well." Rafe said as he turned in his chair to look at Dodger.

"It's chilly this morning. The fire feels good." Dodger said as he snuggled down into the chair, then asked, "What are you reading?"

Rather than answer, Rafe held the book up so Dodger could read the cover.

"1957 Asian Influenza Statistical Summary." Dodger read aloud, then quietly said, "It sounds like a real page turner."

"I'm still hoping for a happy ending." Rafe said with a grin as he marked his place, then sat the book on the small table between the two chairs.

"So, what do you have planned for us to do today?" Dodger asked as he relaxed.

"Before I answer, have you come up with any ideas for the weekend?" Rafe asked curiously.

"Not even one." Dodger said with a chuckle. "Every time I stop to think about it, I end up falling asleep again."

Rafe nodded, as if he had expected the answer.

"So, did you come up with something?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Tell me what you think of this." Rafe said in prelude. "We could have a nice breakfast, then come in here and put on some relaxing music, then we could read or talk or nap or whatever else we feel like." Rafe said slowly.

"That sounds nice." Dodger said peacefully.

Rafe nodded his agreement, then continued, "Then later, if and when we feel like it, we could go and do a little clothes shopping for you."

Dodger opened his mouth, ready to protest, when Rafe raised his hand to prevent him.

"Yes, you have clothes. I understand that you're not comfortable letting me buy you things. But the simple fact is that you shouldn't have to make due with three changes of clothes. I'd really appreciate it if you would just go along with it this one time." Rafe finished in an urging tone.

Dodger thought for a moment, then quietly said, "Okay."

Rafe smiled and said, "Thank you."

"I told you about how I was always told that I was the 'extra' kid. That's not going to go away overnight. I'll try not to fight you about it, if you'll try to understand that sometimes I can't help it." Dodger said frankly.

"That sounds fair." Rafe said gently, then perked up a little and asked, "So, are you ready for breakfast?"

"Yeah. That sounds good. Can I help?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"How are you at making hashed browns?" Rafe asked curiously as he stood.

"Pretty good, actually. That's one of my better things." Dodger said honestly as he fell into step at Rafe's side.

"That's good. For some reason, I can never make them turn out quite right."

* * * * *

"How many pancakes do you want?" Rafe asked curiously.

"I thought you were going to make eggs." Dodger said hesitantly.

"I am, and some bacon too." Rafe said seriously.

"And I'm making hashed browns." Dodger said slowly.

"So how many pancakes do you want?" Rafe asked curiously.

"Two, if you'll make them little." Dodger said with a grin.

"Right, two silver dollars for Dodger." Rafe said happily.

"I've found the potatoes, but where is the grater?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Try that bottom drawer." Rafe said as he pointed briefly.

Dodger went to the drawer and dug around for a moment before finding the grater.

When he stood, he noticed that Rafe had put something on the counter beside the stove.

"What's that?" Dodger asked curiously.

"It's an electric griddle." Rafe said happily. "In my opinion, it's one of the greatest advances of the modern age."

Dodger smiled at the statement, then hesitantly asked, "You heard that they were able to put a man on the moon, right?"

"Yes. And that's nice, but I can make pancakes, bacon and eggs, all at the same time with this." Rafe said proudly.

"I see your point." Dodger said with a grin, then went back to work on his potatoes.

* * * * *

"Do you want toast?" Rafe asked suddenly.

"No. The pancakes are going to be enough bread for me." Dodger said quickly.

"What about coffee?" Rafe asked curiously.

"If you're having some, I will too." Dodger said casually.

"Well, I don't really like it that much. But I can make some." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"I don't like it either, Rafe. Just skip the coffee." Dodger said with a chuckle.

"Right. I just want this to be a really good meal. I don't want to forget anything." Rafe said as he carefully tended the cooking bacon.

Dodger chuckled, then said, "I think it's going to be all that we can do to eat everything we have here."

"Well, if we're not having coffee, what would you like to drink?" Rafe asked curiously.

"I don't know what you have." Dodger said honestly.

"I could make up some orange juice." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"As long as it doesn't taste like your juice in the glass pitcher, that would be fine." Dodger said frankly.

"You drank my juice?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"Yeah. I forgot what you told me about it and poured myself a glass at breakfast yesterday." Dodger said, then noticed that Rafe was looking at him with concern. "I didn't care for it."

Rafe slowly nodded, then went back to tending the things on his griddle.

"I need to let the hashed browns cook for a few minutes. I could make the juice." Dodger said seriously.

"Oh, yes. There should be frozen juice in the freezer and you'll find another pitcher over the refrigerator." Rafe said quickly.

Dodger nodded, then went to work.

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"I hope you like your hashed browns crispy." Dodger said after returning to the stove.

"How crispy?" Rafe asked carefully.

"Not too bad, I'd say we've got equal parts hash and brown here." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"That sounds good to me." Rafe said as he handed Dodger a plate of food.

Dodger added some hashed browns to the plate, then reached over and placed it on the table.

"We make quite a team." Rafe said as he handed Dodger the next plate.

"Yeah. It looks that way now. But I think the real proof is when we do the cleanup. That's when the teamwork will cause you to sink or swim." Dodger said as he placed the second plate on the table.

Rafe looked at the two nearly identical glasses of juice on the table with question.

"That one's yours." Dodger said as soon as he noticed.

"Thank you." Rafe said quietly.

"Yeah." Dodger said with a sigh, and prepared himself to ask Rafe about what was really going on.

The anxious look in Rafe's eyes caused Dodger to completely change what he was going to say.

"There's something going on around here that I don't understand." Dodger said quietly. "Whatever it is, I know that you'll tell me about it when I need to know. So until then, I'm going to try not to worry about it."

Rafe looked at Dodger uncertainly for a moment, then hesitantly broke into a smile.

"Do we have any syrup for these pancakes?" Dodger asked curiously.

Rafe blinked at the question, then said, "Yes. Just give me a second."

Dodger watched Rafe run to the cupboard to get the syrup and smiled to himself, feeling that he may have just navigated around something that could have been very bad.

* * * * *

"I don't mind doing the washing up." Rafe said as he carried the dirty dishes to the sink.

"But you know where things belong. It makes more sense for me to wash and for you to dry things and put them away." Dodger said frankly.

"Okay. For now. But once you get more familiar with where things are, I expect us to trade off." Rafe said firmly.

"That sounds fair to me." Dodger said as he began to run wash water in the sink.

"I've thought about getting a dishwasher, but I couldn't see the point when it was just me. It would probably take a week of eating before I had enough dishes to make a load." Rafe said seriously as he picked up a towel and waited by the dish drainer.

Dodger chuckled and shook his head.

"What's funny now?" Rafe asked curiously.

"You should see the house I grew up in. Imagine how it is for thirteen people living in a three bedroom house. Ever since I was so small that I had to pull a chair up to the sink, I had to do the dishes three times a day." Dodger said distantly.

"Why is that funny?" Rafe asked quietly.

"I just think it's funny that you're talking about getting a dish washing machine to do this little speck of dishes." Dodger said, then smiled at Rafe warmly as he rinsed a plate, then placed it in the drainer.

"Well, I'm not planning on buying one, I was just mentioning that I had thought about it." Rafe said seriously.

"But..." Rafe began to say, then seemed to think better of it.

"But what?" Dodger asked curiously as he washed a glass.

"Well, I already know what you're going to say, but... you said that I should see the house you grew up in. We could do that. We could go there." Rafe said hesitantly.

"Are you talking about just hopping in the car and driving to West Virginia?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Yes. It's not really that far. It would be possible to do it this weekend." Rafe said seriously.

Dodger seemed to think about it, then slowly shook his head.

"I didn't think so. But I thought it was important to mention that it was possible. If you ever do want to go back and visit, we can do it." Rafe said gently.

"Maybe someday." Dodger said quietly, then began to wash the dishes again.

"Take all the time you need." Rafe said with a smile.

* * * * *

"So what are you reading?" Rafe asked as he settled into his chair.

Dodger held up his book so Rafe could read the title on the spine.

"The Warlord of Mars?" Rafe asked with surprise. "That's the third in the series, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I read the first two at the library in Columbus, and I had started on this one." Dodger said happily. "When I was looking through your library, I found the whole set."

"Yes. I went through an Edgar Rice Burroughs phase. I'm pretty sure I have every book he ever published." Rafe said with a wistful smile.

"I know I enjoyed the Tarzan books. But I noticed that you have a few that they didn't have in our library back home. I'm going to have to go back and read those when I finish this one." Dodger said happily.

"Have you watched the movies?" Rafe asked curiously.

"Yeah. Some of them. That's what got me interested in the books. After the movie was over, I still wanted more." Dodger said with a grin.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that." Rafe said seriously. "Looking around the world today, I've been getting the feeling that people are replacing reading with movies and television."

"What's wrong with that?" Dodger asked curiously.

"It's lazy." Rafe said simply. "You don't have to think. You don't have to imagine. Even if it's based on a great literary masterpiece, you're letting someone else put their interpretation directly into your mind. You have musical cues to tell you what to feel, on television you even have laugh tracks to tell you when to laugh."

Dodger nodded that he understood.

"Of course, on television, you also have dozens of shows, each with a slightly different premise all regurgitating the same hackneyed story lines and trite jokes. I feel like watching television is mind numbing, it's the opposite of thinking. It decreases intelligence, motivation, imagination... I fear for our civilization."

"So I'm guessing that you don't watch television or movies." Dodger said slowly.

"I do, but very little. I think the medium has great potential if it's used properly, but I also think it has great potential to be misused. And from what I've seen so far, I'm not encouraged." Rafe said frankly.

Dodger considered for a moment, then carefully said, "I think I agree with you."

Rafe looked at Dodger with an exaggerated expression of surprise, then said, "Well, I guess there's a first time for everything."

Dodger giggled, then said, "I agree with you a lot. I usually only speak up when I disagree."

"Thank you for that, Dodger." Rafe said seriously. "I like knowing that you'll give me your honest opinion."

"You can always count on that, Rafe." Dodger said as he met Rafe's eyes. "You've done so much for me I can't even list all of it. And the only thing you've ever asked of me is my honesty. I'm going to do my best to give it to you."

"You're doing a great job so far." Rafe said gently.

"Thanks."

Chapter 5

Rafe put a record on the record player and Dodger tended the fire, but for the most part, they enjoyed a time of tranquil companionship.

Suddenly, Rafe asked, "What's your full name?"

"Why?" Dodger asked with a grin.

"I'm just curious." Rafe said as he laid his book in his lap.

"Desmond Matthew Tribodeaux." Dodger said seriously.

Rafe thought for a moment, then said, "I like it."

"It took me half a year to learn how to spell it." Dodger said with a chuckle.

"Still, it has character." Rafe said casually.

"I always felt like my parents ran out of good names before they got to me." Dodger said frankly.

"How so?" Rafe asked with interest.

"David, Darryl, Donny, Danny, Duncan... then me, Desmond." Dodger said with a sour look.

"Davids are a dime a dozen, but Desmonds are rare and special." Rafe said with a grin.

"I'll take your word for it." Dodger chuckled.

"If you're sixteen, and there's five years between you and your next older sister, then wouldn't that mean that all your brothers and sisters are adults now?" Rafe asked curiously.

"Yes. At least, legally." Dodger said with a hesitant expression.

"Oh. Not a bright bunch, I take it." Rafe asked slowly.

"Well, no. Not really. And add to it that they were all pulled out of school when they finished sixth grade." Dodger said thoughtfully. "Two of my sisters got married and moved away, but one of them came back with a baby latched on and another in the oven. Her husband ran off with a fifteen year old hitchhiker from Pittsburgh." Dodger said frankly.

"Ouch. And you said that your family barely had enough food as it was." Rafe said with a wince.

"Yeah. But even in good years we didn't usually have enough to make it all the way through the winter without having to do without something." Dodger said seriously.

"It sounds like a tough life." Rafe said frankly.

"Yeah. But when that's the only life you know, that's just the way it is." Dodger said honestly.

"How was it for you?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"Mind numbingly endless." Dodger said frankly. "Every day was filled with the same thing over and over without any promise of it ever ending."

"It sounds like a hopeless existence." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"Hopeless." Dodger said with a nod. "That's exactly how it felt."

Rafe shook his head in wonder.

"Cooking and cleaning up after everyone was a full time job for two of us. But I'm sure mom's got Donna to help her, now that I'm gone." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"Donna?" Rafe asked curiously.

"The one with the babies." Dodger explained simply.

"I'm glad you're out of that." Rafe said with a smile at Dodger.

"So am I." Dodger said with a smile in return.

* * * * *

The pair began reading again, and both enjoyed the relaxation of listening to music.

Suddenly, Rafe asked, "Do you like stew?"

"Um, sure. I love it." Dodger said with surprise at the suddenness of the question.

"I think I'd like to cook some stew over the fire today." Rafe said with a grin.

"Hey, that sounds good." Dodger said happily.

"I'll get the cast iron kettle out if you'll start on the vegetables." Rafe said as he got up from his chair.

"I'm on it." Dodger said, as he hurried into the kitchen.

Rafe was right behind him and grabbed a can of shortening and some paper towels.

After washing and chunking up some carrots, potatoes and celery, Dodger looked around but couldn't find any onions.

"Rafe, where are the onions?" Dodger called into the living room.

"I don't have any fresh. Use the cocktail onions in the cabinet. A jar should do it." Rafe said as he greased the inside of the cast iron pot.

"I'm just about done with the vegetables then, what else can I do?" Dodger asked from the kitchen doorway.

"There's a roast in the bottom shelf of the refrigerator. You can cube it up, then roll it in flour. By the time you're done with that, I should be ready for it." Rafe said as he hung the kettle on a swing arm in the fireplace.

"Salt and pepper in the flour?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Yes, but not much. Figure that the cast iron is going to add a little bit of it's own seasoning." Rafe said with a grin.

"Right." Dodger said with a chuckle.

* * * * *

"Are you ready for this?" Dodger asked as he brought the floured meat to the fireplace.

"Yes. I think it's hot enough, I should be able to brown it just right." Rafe said happily.

"Is there anything else I can get while you're doing that?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Yes. About a gallon of water." Rafe said simply.

"I'll be right back." Dodger said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Here's the water... that smells good." Dodger said with a grin.

"It only gets better from here." Rafe said happily, then started adding the water to the sizzling meat.

"When will you be ready for the vegetables?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Not for a good while. Right now I add the water and the seasoning, then about an hour before we eat, I'll add the vegetables." Rafe said seriously.

"Then why did you have me get them ready so early?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Because we're going to be making biscuits and cornbread. This way we won't have to fool with the vegetables when we have other things that we need to do." Rafe said, as though it were obvious.

"Biscuits AND cornbread?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Yes. For a long time, every time I would make stew I would make either biscuits or cornbread and every single time, I felt like I had picked the wrong one. Then one day I realized, it wasn't a case of either/or. I made both and it was perfection." Rafe said happily.

"Well, I certainly can't argue with logic like that." Dodger said with a chuckle.

"I hope you won't think me too much of a city boy, but I'm going to make the biscuits and cornbread in the oven. I have a dutch oven, but no matter what I do, I always burn the biscuits."

Dodger chuckled and said, "That's fine, Rafe. We used an oven back home. I hate to think what it would take to cook enough to feed my bottomless pit of a family if I had to cook everything over the fire."

"Let me get to seasoning this, then I'll start on the biscuits." Rafe said seriously.

"Can I help?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"Absolutely. In fact, I'm counting on you." Rafe said, then took the empty water jug into the kitchen.

* * * * *

Dodger and Rafe worked well as a team making baking powder biscuits from scratch.

"This is going to make a LOT of biscuits." Dodger said as he realized just how much they were making.

"I want to have some for tomorrow." Rafe said casually. "I'm planning on making sausage gravy in the morning."

"I don't think having enough is going to be a problem." Dodger said hesitantly, then got back to cutting shortening into the flour with a pastry fork.

When the dough was finished, folded about a dozen times and finally rolled and cut into biscuits, Dodger asked, "Are these ready to go into the oven?"

"No. The refrigerator." Rafe said absently.

"You're kidding!" Dodger said with surprise.

"No. You refrigerate them for about two hours, then take them out and turn on the oven. When the oven is hot, it's time to put them in." Rafe said seriously.

"Why?" Dodger asked in confusion.

Rafe shrugged, then said, "That's just the way you do it."

"That's not the way I've ever done it." Dodger countered.

"Next time, we'll do it your way and see if it makes a difference." Rafe said simply.

"Okay." Dodger agreed, then put the pan of biscuits in the refrigerator.

"Are you ready for some lunch?" Rafe asked as he wiped down the counter where they had rolled out the biscuits.

"I thought we were going to be having the beef stew for lunch." Dodger said cautiously.

"Oh no, it won't be ready. The stew has to have time to stew." Rafe said with a grin.

"What's for lunch, then?" Dodger asked curiously.

"I don't know. Why don't you pick?" Rafe said happily.

"Okay. I will." Dodger said with a smile.

"While you're doing that, I'll go check on the fire." Rafe said, then hurried out of the kitchen.

Dodger smiled, then started looking through cupboards to see what they had to make a light lunch.

* * * * *

After a nice lunch of fried ham and egg sandwiches, the pair went into the living room to settle down by the fire and read some more.

"Are you about ready to start on the cornbread?" Rafe asked, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Sure. You'll have to tell me what to do." Dodger said frankly, then cautiously added, "I've made cornbread all my life, but I'm betting that you do it different from me."

"Probably." Rafe said, then put down his book and started walking toward the kitchen.

Dodger happily followed, then realized that he was really enjoying cooking.

* * * * *

"Hold on, you're putting corn in it?" Dodger asked hesitantly.

"It's CORNbread, isn't it?" Rafe asked with a smile.

"Yeah, I thought that was because it's made with cornmeal." Dodger said slowly.

"The cornbread pans are in the drawer under the oven. If you'll grease them, I'll finish this up." Rafe said with a grin.

After a moment of looking through the drawer, Dodger looked up and said, "You have cornbread pans in the shape of ears of corn?"

"Yeah. What else?" Rafe asked curiously.

"We always used a cake pan." Dodger said frankly.

"Do you like the crusty edges on your cornbread?" Rafe asked seriously.

"Oh yeah. That's the best part." Dodger said with a smile.

"Well, this way, every piece has those crusty edges."

"Okay. I can't wait." Dodger said happily.

"Just slop the grease around in there. More grease means more crispy."

"You don't have to tell me twice." Dodger said with determination.

"While you're doing that, I'm going to add the vegetables to the stew. This batter needs to rest for a few minutes before it can be used."

Dodger shook his head, never having heard of such a thing as letting dough and batter 'rest'.

* * * * *

"Are we ready to do some cooking?" Rafe asked as he walked back into the kitchen with the bowl that had been holding the vegetables.

"I've been ready since this morning." Dodger said honestly.

"Well, the biscuits cook a little bit longer than the cornbread, so we'll need to put them in now, then fill the cornbread pans. In about five minutes, we'll put the cornbread in and everything should be ready to come out at the same time." Rafe said with a smile.

"I think I see what you mean about doing the vegetables early." Dodger said seriously.

"Yeah. Go ahead and put the biscuits in."

Dodger nodded, then put the pan of biscuits into the oven.

"Would you like to dip batter or wash dishes?" Rafe asked as he paused for a moment.

Dodger considered, then said, "Dishes, I think."

"Well, if you'll get started, I'll have the cornbread bowl for you in just a few minutes." Rafe said in concentration as he dipped spoonfuls of batter into the cornbread pans.

"I think we're getting the hang of this teamwork thing." Dodger said happily.

* * * * *

"The biscuits and cornbread should be ready to come out. Sit them on the stove and let them rest for about ten minutes." Rafe said seriously.

"What does that do?" Dodger asked curiously.

"It gives the bread time to firm up, so it won't be as likely to crumble when you pick it up." Rafe said casually.

Dodger nodded, then pulled out the pan of biscuits.

"That looks GOOD." Dodger said with a hungry smile.

"I think so, too." Rafe said with a grin.

"Wow, the cornbread looks nice, too. They're perfectly browned." Dodger said in an impressed voice.

"It's a feast for the eyes. But the real test will be to find out if it's edible." Rafe said with a grin.

"I'm not worried about that. Anything that looks this good has to taste good." Dodger said frankly.

"All we can do is wait on this. Why don't we go check on the stew?" Rafe asked casually.

"I'm right behind you." Dodger said happily.

"Bring a spoon." Rafe said with a grin.

"Oh yeah!" Dodger said, then grabbed a table spoon from the silverware drawer.

* * * * *

"Oh Rafe, that's incredible!" Dodger said after tasting the stew.

"It's the cast iron." Rafe said simply. "You could make exactly the same recipe on the stove and it wouldn't taste nearly as good."

"I don't even want to find out. I think I'm spoiled for any beef stew but yours after this." Dodger said as he knelt before the fireplace.

"Well, do you think it's ready?" Rafe asked with a smile.

"If it were any closer to perfection, it couldn't exist in an imperfect world." Dodger said as he stood.

Rafe chuckled at the statement, then said, "Go set the table while I carry this in to the kitchen."

"Do you need some help carrying that?" Dodger asked with concern.

"No. I've got it. Just don't get between me and the stove." Rafe said seriously.

Dodger hurried into the kitchen and made sure that there was nothing on the stove top to get in Rafe's way.

* * * * *

"Well, what do you think of the biscuits?" Rafe asked hopefully.

"I always thought my ma could cook. But you done put her to shame." Dodger said with an exaggerated accent.

"Try the cornbread." Rafe said with a smile.

Dodger looked at it cautiously, then picked up a piece and looked at it from different angles.

"You can split it and butter it, dunk it, or crumble it into your stew." Rafe said with a smile.

"I'll try the butter first." Dodger said decisively.

Rafe waited for Dodger's reaction.

Dodger's eyes rolled up as a low groan started in his throat.

"Either you like it, or it's killing you." Rafe said with a chuckle.

"If it's killing me, I'm dying happy." Dodger finally said.

"I'm glad you like it." Rafe said with a smile.

"How'd you get it so sweet?" Dodger asked curiously.

"I added sugar." Rafe said simply.

Dodger looked at him with surprise for a moment, then shook his head in wonder.

"Don't let your stew get cold." Rafe said with a grin.

"It won't get the chance." Dodger said, then took a spoonful.

Rafe watched the look of delight on Dodger's face, then took a spoonful of his own stew.

* * * * *

"Are you okay?" Rafe asked with concern.

"You already know that I'm uncomfortable with you spending money on me. But since I promised that I wouldn't argue with you, yeah, I'm fine." Dodger said seriously.

"Try thinking about it this way." Rafe said, as he drove, "Right now, you really don't have any opportunities to earn the money that you would need to buy these things for yourself. Right?"

"Right." Dodger admitted slowly.

"But to get the opportunities, to earn the money to buy new clothes, you'll need new clothes for people to take you seriously." Rafe said carefully.

"Right." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"So, it makes sense for me to do this for you now." Rafe finished simply.

"Yeah. But for how long?" Dodger asked as he turned to look Rafe in the eyes.

"I can't tell you that right now. But it won't be for any longer than it has to be." Rafe said seriously. "I know it bothers you, so I'll do everything I can to get you to the point where you can support yourself and you don't have to depend on me or anyone else to ever take care of you again."

Dodger thought about the words for a moment, then quietly said, "I don't mind you taking care of me. It just drives me nuts that I can't take care of you too."

Rafe smiled at the response, then said, "I know, Dodger, and we'll get that fixed just as soon as we can. I promise."

* * * * *

When they arrived in town, Dodger once again had his expectations turned around on him.

He had expected Rafe to take him to some little casual, out of the way shop to do their shopping, but instead they pulled up in front of a large department store.

"I've never been in here before, but from the advertising, it looks like it should have everything you'll need." Rafe said as he got out of the car.

"Yeah." Dodger said slowly, then added, "I've never been here before, either."

"Then let's go explore." Rafe said with a smile, then led the way to the store.

* * * * *

"Is something wrong?" Dodger asked when he noticed Rafe squinting.

"These lights. I didn't expect them to be so bright." Rafe said in a pained voice.

"Well, you've been driving in the dark for a while, maybe you just need time for your eyes to adjust." Dodger said cautiously.

"Maybe." Rafe said incredulously.

* * * * *

"What do you think of this?" Dodger asked as he held up a shirt.

"The words hideous and revolting come to mind." Rafe said as he squinted at the brightly colored shirt.

"Rafe, would you feel better if we left? We can do this some other time." Dodger asked with concern.

"No. I can get through it. But would you put that eyesore away?" Rafe asked hopefully.

"Maybe they have some sunglasses. That might help." Dodger asked as he put the offensive shirt back on the rack.

"Actually, I have some here. I just don't like wearing them indoors." Rafe said seriously.

"Put them on." Dodger said firmly.

"But I don't want to look out of place." Rafe said slowly.

"Rafe, put on the damned sunglasses." Dodger said as he looked Rafe in the eyes.

After a moment, Rafe reached into his chest pocket and pulled out a clamshell case, then put on a pair of very dark sunglasses.

"Better?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"Much better." Rafe said with relief.

"Good. Because you were getting worse than my sisters at that time of the month." Dodger said, then walked to a different rack of shirts to start looking at the selection.

Rafe looked at Dodger with surprise, then broke into a smile.

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"What do you think of this?" Rafe asked as he walked up to Dodger with a shirt.

"Hey, that's nice. Where did you find that?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Well, it suddenly dawned on me that we've been looking at the large selections in the boys department. And what we should be looking at is the small selections in the men's department." Rafe said frankly.

Dodger looked at Rafe with disbelief for a moment, then broke into a smile.

"It's over this way." Rafe said with a grin at Dodger's happiness.

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"I didn't even think about it, but it's only a week until Christmas, isn't it?" Dodger asked as he looked at a display of Christmas decorations.

"Yes. I guess so." Rafe said noncommittally.

"You don't celebrate Christmas?" Dodger asked curiously.

"No. I never have." Rafe said frankly.

"Are you Jewish?" Dodger asked as he stopped to look at Rafe.

"No. My family just never celebrated Christian holidays." Rafe said carefully.

"Well, we celebrated the holidays, but we never went to church or anything like that." Dodger said casually, then looked at Rafe and said, "Pa."

"I'm betting he thought that sitting in church was wasting time and sitting on your ass when you should be working." Rafe said frankly.

"That's it, just about word for word." Dodger said with a chuckle.

"So, do you want to celebrate Christmas?" Rafe asked curiously.

"I'd kind of like to, if you don't have a problem with it." Dodger said seriously.

"No. I don't have any problem. I just don't think it ever occurred to me before." Rafe said frankly. "Christmas was always something that other people did."

Dodger looked around, then said, "I want to celebrate Christmas, but not like this."

"How do you mean?" Rafe asked curiously.

"Let's go over and look at the shoes and I'll tell you." Dodger said, then led the way toward the shoe department.

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The discussion of Christmas went on from the shoe department into the coat department.

As they were walking down one of the main aisles, Dodger stopped suddenly at a display of Christmas cards.

It took a moment for Rafe to notice that Dodger wasn't at his side.

"What do you think of this?" Dodger asked as he held out a Christmas card.

After a moment to look it over, Rafe hesitantly said, "I appreciate the thought, but I really don't need something like this. I wouldn't know what to do with it."

Dodger broke into a grin, then said, "I was thinking of sending it to my family."

"Oh! Then I think it's great!" Rafe said with a smile.

Dodger slowly nodded, then put the card and it's matching envelope into the shopping cart.

* * * * *

It was Monday afternoon and Dodger was waiting anxiously for Rafe to come home from work.

Of course he was feeling a little bit lonely after spending nearly every minute of the past two days with Rafe, but there was also the fact that it was getting late. It was already dark outside and Dodger was concerned by the sound of the increasing winds.

There wasn't any snow, but the roads might be icy from the combination of the wind and cold.

He had tried to read to take his mind off of his worry, but it wasn't any use. He couldn't keep his mind focused enough to remember what he was reading, from one word to the next.

Just when he thought he couldn't stand the waiting a moment longer, he heard the garage door open.

Dodger raced out of the living room and through the kitchen and laundry room at top speed.

* * * * *

"Are you okay?" Dodger asked as he hurried into the garage.

"Yes. I'm fine." Rafe said in confusion, then recognizing the worry in Dodger's eyes, he said, "I stopped by the store for a few things, on the way home. Would you like to help me haul it in?"

"Um, yeah. I'm glad your home. I missed you." Dodger said as he tried to get himself under control.

"I missed you, too." Rafe said warmly, then opened the trunk of his car.

"What is all this stuff?" Dodger asked curiously.

"What you told me about while we were shopping the other day. I've got colored paper, glitter, glue, popcorn, cranberries, foil... I think I got everything that you mentioned." Rafe said seriously.

Dodger looked at the bags of supplies, then broke into laughter.

"What's funny?" Rafe asked with confusion. "Did I forget something?"

"This is the stuff that we need to decorate a tree... we don't have a tree." Dodger said before breaking into laughter again.

"Oh, I thought of that." Rafe said quickly.

"You did?" Dodger asked with surprise.

"Yes. I bought one of those things... it's here somewhere." Rafe said as he dug around in the pile of brown paper shopping bags. "Here it is."

Dodger looked at the box that contained a Christmas tree stand.

"Okay." Dodger said hesitantly.

"We've got about fifteen miles of trees in every direction. Just pick the one you want and it's yours." Rafe said simply.

Dodger's eyes went wide, then he broke into a grand smile.

"Help me get these things in, then we can go and find a tree before it gets too cold." Rafe said with a smile at Dodger's happiness.

"Okay!"

Chapter 6

After starting the fire in the fireplace, Rafe settled into his chair and looked at the Christmas tree.

He had to admit that it really was beautiful.

In past years, when he had bothered to think about it at all, he had thought that the strange custom was gaudy and pointless.

But sitting here, he couldn't help but appreciate the joy that it had brought to Dodger... and to him too.

Since the moment that they had dragged the tree into the house and stood it in it's stand, Dodger had been like a young child, delighting in the challenge of making the plain pine tree into something special that they could share.

Everything that adorned the tree was made by them. Every folded paper shape, carefully and lovingly covered with fancy patterns of glue that had been doused in glitter. Every shiny foil star, every bow that had been lovingly tied to the branches.

Popcorn and cranberries had been strung and draped across branches to make happy little trails of contrasting color behind the myriad of whimsical shapes of handmade ornaments.

They had worked together, talking and laughing as they made the decorations for their tree. For the first time, Rafe appreciated why Christmas was considered such a special time.

He was almost disappointed when, the previous night, Dodger had announced that the tree was finished.

Rafe wanted to protest, to plead his case that they could still make more decorations. But he knew that yesterday was Christmas Eve and now was the time for them to enjoy the fruits of their labor. And he WAS enjoying it.

A sound drew Rafe's attention and he smiled to see Dodger happily scurrying down the stairs, wearing his pajamas.

The smile on his face and the disheveled look of his hair gave evidence to the fact that Dodger had tumbled out of bed and came directly downstairs to enjoy Christmas morning with him.

"Merry Christmas." Dodger said happily as he walked to join Rafe by the fire.

"Merry Christmas, Dodger." Rafe responded with a warm smile.

"It's really beautiful, isn't it?" Dodger asked as he settled into his chair.

"Yes. I can't even imagine a more perfect Christmas tree." Rafe said gently.

"The store bought lights and decorations might have been easier, but they wouldn't mean as much." Dodger said as he looked at the tree with admiration.

"Yes." Rafe whispered as he enjoyed the look of joy in Dodger's eyes.

"What's in the box?" Dodger asked when he noticed a package wrapped in plain brown shipping paper, sitting beside, almost under, the tree.

"Why don't you open it and find out?" Rafe asked with a smile.

"You weren't supposed to buy presents! Rafe, I didn't get you anything!" Dodger said anxiously.

"Relax Dodger. This isn't exactly a present, it was delivered to my office day before yesterday and I just thought that this would be the right time to give it to you."

"And how is that NOT a present?" Dodger asked carefully.

"Just open it." Rafe said with a grin.

Dodger got out of the chair, then crawled across the floor to the tree and carefully started to unwrap the box.

Rafe watched closely for Dodger's reaction.

"Books?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Yes." Rafe said gently.

"But what..." Dodger trailed off as he took one book after another out of the box and looked at them. "These look like school books."

"That's right." Rafe said with a smile.

Dodger looked at Rafe with surprise as he realized what this might mean. "Did you find a way for me to go back to school?"

"Yes and no." Rafe said with a smile. "Come over here and sit down and I'll explain what I found."

Dodger quickly got up off the floor, then took his usual seat in his wing backed chair in front of the fire.

"I realize that it would have been difficult for you to go back to school and start seventh grade with a group of children much younger than yourself." Rafe said in prelude, "So I inquired about alternatives and found that there is a test that you can take, it's called the High School Equivalency Exam. If you can pass that test, you will be awarded the equivalent of a high school diploma."

Dodger thought for a moment, then looked at the box by the tree.

"If you're willing, I was planning to hire a tutor, a retired school teacher, to come here on weekdays and help you prepare for that exam." Rafe said carefully.

"So while you're working, I'll be studying?" Dodger asked thoughtfully.

"Yes. If that's what you want to do." Rafe said expectantly, waiting for Dodger's full reaction.

"Yes! Of course I want to!" Dodger said with unrestrained glee.

Rafe smiled at the reaction, glad that he had decided to wait to tell Dodger about it on this special day.

"Then after Christmas, I'll tell Mr. Verner that he has a willing student who needs his services." Rafe said happily.

Dodger seemed to be so filled with energy that he might just bounce out of his chair, but then he suddenly became still as a look of regret crossed his face.

"What's wrong?" Rafe asked with concern.

"This is so wonderful..." Dodger said quietly, "But I couldn't get you anything."

"You gave me a gift that money couldn't buy." Rafe said seriously.

At Dodger's worried gaze, Rafe continued, "You gave me Christmas."

"But it doesn't seem like enough." Dodger said quietly.

"Dodger, without you, I wouldn't have had a Christmas this year." Rafe said firmly. "Finding the tree, making the ornaments, all of it never would have happened without you. And this has been very special for me. Please trust me when I tell you that this is more of a gift than I ever expected... ever imagined."

Dodger thought about the words, then quietly said, "I'm glad that you enjoyed it. I didn't know if you would."

"I didn't know if I would either. But spending this time with you, decorating our tree... it's been magical." Rafe said as he looked into Dodger's eyes.

"For me too." Dodger said with a smile.

* * * * *

New years day came and went. Winter seemed like it wanted to keep it's icy grasp firmly on them, but finally it reluctantly gave way to spring.

Rafe had gone back to his normal work schedule, helping patients and other doctors to get through the cold and flu season as smoothly as possible.

Dodger spent every day studying with Mr. Verner, preparing for the biggest test of his life.

At first, Dodger worried that he might not be smart enough to do all that was being asked of him, but both Rafe and Mr. Verner had encouraged him and proclaimed their faith in his intelligence and dedication to his task.

Dodger bolted up out of his chair at the kitchen table when he heard the garage door opening.

Before Rafe could even bring his car to a complete stop in the garage, Dodger was there, anxiously waiting for him.

"You seemed to be excited about something." Rafe said casually as he got out of the car.

"I took my test today!" Dodger said quickly.

"Oh? That was today?" Rafe asked as he walked past Dodger into the laundry room.

"Yes. I've been talking about it for a week. How could you forget?" Dodger asked in a voice that ended with a squeak.

Rafe chuckled, then said, "I didn't forget. How do you think you did?"

"I don't know." Dodger said quickly. "I mean, I think I did okay, but there was just so much of it... I could have screwed something up."

"Well, it's done now, so there's no use in worrying about it." Rafe said soothingly, then asked, "When will you know how you did?"

"They said that I could call for the results on Monday." Dodger said anxiously and seemed to be one step away from bursting out in tears of frustration.

Rafe nodded, then asked, "Did you make dinner?"

"No. I thought you were saying something about us going to the club tonight." Dodger said seriously, temporarily derailed from his anxiety.

"Yes. It's been a while since we've gone out, and I thought it would be nice to spend the evening relaxing in the company of friends." Rafe said quietly.

Dodger nodded, then said, "Maybe that's what I need. I'm kind of a basket case right now."

Rafe chuckled at the statement, then said, "Kind of?"

Dodger smiled and nodded.

"Let's go get ready and I'll meet you back here in a few minutes." Rafe said with a smile.

"Yeah. I've got everything laid out and ready to go." Dodger said quickly, then raced out of the room.

Rafe smiled as he walked more slowly to go and prepare for their evening.

* * * * *

Dodger was actually able to settle down and relax through dinner.

Both he and Rafe had ordered the chef's special, roast goose with walnut stuffing. And both men agreed that it was one of the chef's best meals to date.

As they both sat and relaxed, just enjoying the casual and free atmosphere, the dining room lights started to dim and the light on the stage became brighter.

"Is there a show tonight?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Not that I've heard of." Rafe said as he directed his attention toward the man walking onto the stage.

"Good evening everyone." The man said seriously. "Tonight we're here to celebrate a very special occasion."

Dodger looked at Rafe curiously to receive a shrug in response.

"I'm going to need one of you to help me... you there." The man said as he looked at the audience, then asked, "Dodger, is it? Could you come up here and help me?"

After a moment of hesitation, Dodger reluctantly stood then walked to the stage.

"This will just take a minute. Would you put this on?" the man asked hopefully as he handed Dodger a long silky black robe.

"Um, sure." Dodger said uncertainly, then quickly slipped the robe on.

"You don't have to do anything but stand there." The man whispered, then walked behind Dodger and said, "Hold still."

Dodger felt a hat being placed on his head, then something made him jump as it swung close to his face.

It took a moment for him to focus on it and realize that what he was looking at was a tassel, hanging inches from his cheek.

"Now, I would like to present Mr. Aaron Kershaw, the superintendent of schools." the announcer said happily, then took a step back.

Dodger turned slowly to see the man in a gray business suit approaching.

"It is with great pride that I stand before you tonight to honor this young man who, against all odds, chose to pursue his dream of receiving an education." Mr. Kershaw said in a booming voice.

"So, without further adieu, I present this diploma to Desmond Matthew Tribodeaux, certifying that he has met all the conditions and qualifications required to receive his high school equivalency." Mr. Kershaw said proudly, then offered the rolled piece of paper to Dodger.

Slowly, Dodger took the offered paper, then held still as Mr. Kershaw moved the tassel on his hat to the other side.

Applause filled Dodger's ears as the significance of what was happening started to sink in.

Dodger looked out at the people of the club, and felt that they expected him to say something.

"The day I met Rafe, I said that I was an ignorant hoopie who didn't have the sense to stay where he belonged. Since then, I've discovered a few things. I'm a hoopie, that's a hill person for those of you not familiar with the term. I was born a hoopie and that's what I'll always be. But as far as having the sense to stay where I belonged... that wasn't true. I had the good luck to find where I belonged. That's here, with all of you."

"And as far as being ignorant... well, maybe I was. But the good thing about ignorance is that it can be fixed." Dodger finished happily as he held up his diploma.

A round of applause spread through the room, then Dodger stood back, letting the announcer take over.

"Thank you for your time. Enjoy the rest of your evening." The announcer said, then the lights on stage dimmed as the house lights in the dining room went up again.

"I hope you realize that you have some very good friends who care about you to arrange all of this." Mr. Kershaw said quietly.

"Yes. I really do, and I'm thankful for them." Dodger said with a smile.

"Good. That's important." Mr. Kershaw said, then stepped away as two identical men approached.

"I don't think we've spoken before..." One of the men began.

"...but we've seen you around." The other finished. "I'm Blake, he's Ernie."

"Yes. I've seen you, too." Dodger said quietly, then quickly added, "I'm Dodger."

"When we got invited, Manna told us about how things used to be for you." Ernie said frankly.

"How did she know?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Rafe told her." Blake said simply.

"Rafe knows about us and I think he thought that we'd understand better than most, about what you went through." Ernie said slowly.

"Our mom always called us stupid." Blake said quietly.

"She used to say that between us, we still only had half a brain." Ernie said in a pained voice.

"When we accomplished anything, she would ignore or belittle it." Blake said darkly.

"She'd say that even a broken clock is right twice a day." Ernie said sadly.

"But if we screwed up, she'd be there to hold it up for all to see as evidence that we were failures." Blake said bitterly.

"We were a real mess when Manna found us." Ernie said distantly.

"But somehow she was able to get past the insecurities and defenses that we had built up." Blake said in wonder.

"She loved us." Ernie said with a small smile.

"That's right. Before anything else, she loved us." Blake said firmly.

"Since then, she's always encouraged us. She believes in us." Ernie said as his smile got bigger.

"She was there to urge us forward and celebrate our achievements." Blake said with a grin at his brother.

"And she was also there to share in our failures." Ernie said seriously.

Dodger nodded that he understood what they were saying.

"So, we know how it is when you grow up with a bad self image." Blake said softly.

"And if you ever need to talk to someone about things like that. We'll be here for you." Ernie said, matching his twin's gentle tone.

"Thank you." Dodger said with a sincere smile, then thought to add, "And if you ever want to, you can talk to me too."

Both men broke into identical smiles at the offer.

Dodger then noticed that Ernie's smile curved up a little more on the right, and Blake's more on the left. Their smiles were identical, but mirrored.

"You two can't hog the guest of honor all night." A womans voice said from behind the twins.

"Dodger, this is Manna." Ernie said as he draped an arm around her.

"She made us the man we are today." Blake said with a teasing grin.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Manna." Dodger said sincerely.

"For me, too." Manna said happily as she held a husband in each arm.

"Do you mind if I steal Dodger away from you?" Rafe asked as he approached Dodger's side.

"You'd better do it quick." Manna said playfully, "I've just about worn these two out."

Ernie and Blake got matching looks of surprise, then moved as one to cuddle and snuggle with Manna, reducing her to giggles.

* * * * *

"I hope you're not upset that I arranged this." Rafe said as he led Dodger back to their table.

"No Rafe, it was wonderful." Dodger said warmly.

"Good." Rafe said with relief. "I knew that since you weren't going through a regular high school program, that you wouldn't get to have a graduation ceremony, so I wanted to provide you the next best thing."

"Rafe, it was perfect. Thank you." Dodger said happily.

"Rene took some pictures while you were on stage." Rafe said casually. "In case you wanted to send one to your family."

"I don't think it will matter to them." Dodger said honestly.

"This isn't about them. It's about you letting them be part of your life." Rafe said simply.

Dodger smiled, then said, "You're right, Rafe. It felt good to send them that Christmas card, so I know it's the right thing to do."

* * * * *

Through the course of the evening, nearly everyone in the club came to their table to offer Dodger their congratulations. Mr. Verner, Leila, Lily and Portia, and even George was there.

Dodger had never known such contentment, such love. Having a friend like Rafe was more than he ever dreamed possible, but having these people, their community, fulfilled a need within him that he never knew he had.

As they got into the car to begin the drive back to the house, Rafe pulled an envelope from his pocket and handed it to Dodger.

"What's this?" Dodger asked curiously.

"A graduation present." Rafe said gently as he started the car.

Dodger opened the envelope and looked at the first piece of paper carefully.

After a moment, he looked up at Rafe with confusion and asked, "You're giving me a business machine?"

"No, I'm giving you stock in a company that makes them." Rafe said gently. "Now that you're a high school graduate, I thought that you should have something that you can call your own. Just keep these stocks, and if you ever need them, they might be worth something."

"Thanks Rafe." Dodger whispered as his eyes filled with tears.

"Is something wrong?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"No. It's just... you've done it again." Dodger said with a chuckle through his tears.

"What did I do?" Rafe asked slowly as he turned at an intersection.

"Just when I think I know what to expect, you come up with something that I never imagined." Dodger said distantly. "Who would have ever thought that a runaway hoopie kid could own stock?"

"What about a responsible young man who is a high school graduate?" Rafe asked quietly.

"Me?" Dodger asked incredulously.

"Who else?" Rafe said with a chuckle. "You're almost seventeen years old. In a matter of months, you were able to make up for missing six years of your education... Think about that, Dodger, *six years*."

Dodger slowly nodded.

"So, yes. You might have been a runaway at one particularly low point in your life, but don't let that define who you are." Rafe said imploringly.

Dodger thought for a moment, then slowly said, "It's hard for me to see myself as anything else."

"Then you need to look in the mirror more often, because that's not who you are anymore," Rafe said seriously. "You are a young man, who is hardworking, responsible, *and*, a high school graduate."

"A high school graduate." Dodger repeated, with a smile at the sound of the words.

"And I bet that if you put your mind to it, that you could be a college graduate." Rafe said with a grin.

Dodger's eyes went wide at the suggestion.

"Classes don't start until the fall, so take the time to think about what you'd like to do." Rafe said seriously.

"Me." Dodger whispered, "In college."

Rafe smiled at the expression of awe, then quietly said, "Please don't feel like I'm pushing you to do this. I'm just saying that after graduating high school, for some, this is the next step."

Dodger looked at Rafe curiously, trying to understand what he was *not* saying.

Rafe took Dodger's curious expression to be confusion, so he continued, "I just don't want you to think I'm telling you what to do. I just wanted to mention the possibility so you could be thinking about it if that's something you're interested in."

"I don't feel like you're trying to control me." Dodger said seriously.

Rafe blinked with surprise at the response.

"I guess I can understand why you'd be worried about it, but I've never felt like you were telling me what to do." Dodger said frankly.

Rafe chuckled, then said, "You know, you're pretty insightful."

"Yeah, well I guess it comes with the diploma." Dodger said with a smile.

* * * * *

A ringing phone greeted them as they walked into the kitchen from the laundry room.

"It must be important for anyone to be calling this late." Rafe said with concern. "I'll pick it up in the study."

Dodger nodded, then watched as Rafe hurried away.

After taking off his coat and putting it in the coat closet, Dodger went into the living room and started a fire.

He didn't build it up very much, since it was so late, but it seemed to be a perfect night to relax by the fire for a while before bed.

Dodger sat down in the wing backed chair that he had adopted as his own and took out his diploma, so that he could read it.

Movement drew his attention and he saw Rafe walking out of the study.

One look was all it took for Dodger to know that something was seriously wrong.

The expression on Rafe's face was nothing less than 'devistated'.

"What is it, Rafe? What's wrong?" Dodger asked as he ran to Rafe's side, letting the diploma fall to the floor.

"I... I'm going to have to leave." Rafe said distantly, like he was barely aware of where he was.

"What's wrong? Why do you have to leave?" Dodger asked urgently.

Rafe blinked, then seemed to come back to himself a little. "That call was from a man in New Mexico. From what he told me, he may have an extraordinary immunity case... it could change everything."

"Okay. So you have to go to New Mexico. That's not a problem, is it?" Dodger asked carefully, knowing that something had shaken Rafe to the core.

"Dodger, there's no telling how long I'll have to be gone. It's possible that this could take *years*." Rafe said in anguish.

"Years? You'll be gone for years?" Dodger muttered absently, then quickly said, "I could go with you."

Rafe looked Dodger in the eyes, then reluctantly shook his head.

"Why not? Is it military? Is it because we're not related?" Dodger asked carefully.

"It's not military." Rafe said cautiously.

Dodger waited for a moment, but Rafe didn't continue.

"Rafe. I'm ready to talk about it." Dodger said firmly.

After a moment of puzzled silence, Rafe hesitantly asked, "Talk about what?"

"Right after we first met, the first time we ever went to the club, Clayton asked if we were a couple." Dodger said carefully. "On the way home, we talked about some things and decided that we'd talk about it again later."

Rafe looked at Dodger with confusion, then asked, "You want to talk about that now?"

"If you have to leave, even if it's for years, I want you to know that I'll be here when you get back." Dodger said seriously.

"You don't need to..." Rafe began to say, but was interrupted.

"Yes I do. Not for you, for me." Dodger said firmly. "I love you Dr. Raphael Killian. I don't want to imagine what it would be like to ever be without you. And I know that if you decide that you feel the same way, then no matter how far away you have to go or how long you have to stay away, that someday you'll come home and be with me. And I'll be here, waiting."

"I couldn't ask you to..." Rafe began to say, but was interrupted again.

"You're not asking. I am. You once said that you didn't know if you could love a man in the context of a committed relationship. We've had months to think about it since then. I'm offering to commit to you and asking if you'll commit to me." Dodger said firmly.

Rafe seemed to be frozen in thought. He didn't move, didn't blink, he didn't even seem to be breathing.

Dodger watched carefully, looking for any sign of reaction.

"Do you remember the morning that you almost asked me about the juice that I drink?" Rafe asked hesitantly.

Dodger slowly nodded.

"You said that you knew that I'd tell you when I thought you needed to know." Rafe said in a flat voice that almost sounded like he was reading the words from a page.

Dodger nodded again.

"Before I..." Rafe stopped, then shook his head. "You need to know."

"Whatever it is, you can tell me, Rafe." Dodger said gently.

"Sit down... and get your diploma off the floor. I'm planning on framing that." Rafe said in a forced, playful tone.

Dodger picked up the diploma and sat it carefully on the table between their chairs, then sat down and waited.

"A lot of the people that I've introduced you to since we've met are like me. We have a... condition." Rafe said slowly.

"Are you sick?" Dodger asked with immediate worry.

"No. Not at all." Rafe said quickly, then continued more slowly, "But... this is really difficult to explain."

"Go ahead. Take as long as you need." Dodger said gently.

Rafe nodded, then carefully said, "What I have is something like a virus in some ways, but it's more... thorough. It doesn't attack the host so much as it changes him."

"How?" Dodger asked quietly, not wanting to interrupt, but feeling that Rafe needed the prompting.

"If you think of each cell of the human body as a tiny machine, the organism that I'm talking about rebuilds the machine to be faster and more efficient." Rafe said slowly.

"That sounds like a good thing." Dodger said hesitantly.

"It can be." Rafe said quickly. "We have uncommon strength, speed and agility."

Dodger's eyes went wide, then he said, "Like in the alley behind Lily's salon."

Rafe slowly nodded.

"So I'm guessing that you can't have something that good without getting something bad to go with it." Dodger said cautiously.

Rafe reluctantly nodded, then said, "We also have enhanced senses, which sounds good on the surface, but turns out to be very debilitating."

"How?" Dodger asked slowly.

"With greatly enhanced eyesight comes a sensitivity to bright lights." Rafe said quietly.

"Which is why you have to wear sunglasses inside the department store." Dodger said in realization.

"Enhanced hearing makes going near anything that's loud... painful. That includes movies, concerts or even crowds of excited people." Rafe said as he looked into Dodger's eyes.

"Which is why you spend so much of your time at home." Dodger said knowingly.

"An enhanced sense of smell makes certain scents almost unbearable." Rafe said, then waited for Dodger to make the association.

"Which is why you don't keep garlic or onions in your kitchen." Dodger said with a nod.

"And the worst is having an enhanced sense of touch." Rafe said and finished with a sigh.

"Is that why, in all the time that I've known you, you've never touched me, even once?" Dodger asked suddenly.

Rafe blinked at the question, then stammered, "No. No. But I'll tell you about that, next."

Dodger nodded then slowly asked, "So what is it about super sensitive skin that's so bad?"

"I can't go out in direct sunlight." Rafe admitted cautiously.

Dodger sat and thought about what Rafe was saying, and not saying.

Rafe watched and felt his heart sink as Dodger seemed to fit the pieces together in his mind.

"What is the juice that you're always drinking?" Dodger asked slowly.

"A synthetic supplement, tailored to meet our nutritional needs." Rafe said carefully.

"And if you don't drink that, you drink blood. Right?" Dodger asked cautiously.

Rafe reluctantly nodded.

Dodger was staring at him and seemed to be teetering on the razor thin edge dividing incredulity and belief.

Rafe decided that, no matter what the result, there was only one thing he could do.

He bared his teeth, then his canines dropped down and became more pronounced.

Dodger's eyes went wide and he tried to back away at the sight of the fangs.

Since he was sitting, that involved him scrambling over the arm of the chair, then crab-walking backward for a few feet before he could manage a standing position.

"That's what I've been hiding. I'm sure you can understand why." Rafe said as his heart broke at the terrified look in Dodger's eyes.

"Is that it? I mean, if there's more, you'd better tell me now." Dodger said past his nervous breathing.

"And... I love you." Rafe said quietly as regret carried under the words.

Dodger froze, then looked at Rafe appraisingly for a moment.

He wasn't doing anything the least bit threatening, nor had he ever.

Dodger realized that if Rafe wanted to hurt him, he could have done so at any time over the past three months. He could have easily done it the first time they spoke, right there in the park. He would have just looked like a kid who had frozen to death on the street.

Dodger forced himself to take a long, slow breath, then quietly said, "Okay. I'm sorry. I'm better, now."

Rafe looked at him uncertainly for a moment, then gestured toward Dodger's chair, inviting him to retake his seat.

"So..." Dodger said, as he went back to his chair, never taking his cautious gaze off Rafe. "Why didn't you ever touch me?"

"This is why." Rafe said as he took a step closer to Dodger, then offered his hand.

Dodger flinched back at first, but slowly got up his nerve and took the offered hand.

"It's as cold as ice." Dodger said, then looked at Rafe disbelievingly.

"Not quite that cold, closer to room temperature. My body maintains a temperature of about seventy two degrees." Rafe said quietly.

"Do you have a heartbeat?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Of course, but it beats slower and fainter than yours. Resting, it's about ten beats per minute, faster when I'm excited, slower when I'm sleeping." Rafe said clinically.

"What about breathing?" Dodger asked thoughtfully.

"My respiration is less than yours unless I'm talking, then it's about the same." Rafe said gently.

"So that's why they would think that vampires are dead. If you're room temperature, and your heart beats so slowly... garlic, sunlight." Dodger said as he thought aloud.

"Among those of us who have been... changed... the term vampire has a somewhat different meaning." Rafe said cautiously.

"What does it mean?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Well, as I was telling you, when the transformative organism is introduced into our bodies, it completely changes us, cell by cell. It makes everything more efficient. Along with the physical changes, there are also mental changes." Rafe said carefully.

Dodger nodded that he understood what Rafe was saying, although he couldn't imagine what point he was working toward.

"There are different ways that it can go. Some will be exposed to the transformative agent and simply die, because their bodies can't endure the change. A long time ago, there was a great danger that an exposed person would lose all thought and become nothing more than an animal in a human body. We believe that was the origin of the werewolf myth. They lost any sense of self and didn't even remember about clothing or personal hygiene. Since that hasn't happened in hundreds of years, I suspect it has something to do with some specific vitamin deficiency."

Dodger smiled when he realized that Rafe had slipped into his doctor persona.

"The next outcome has different stages, and again, we're not sure what makes one person turn out differently from another. But if a person retains his ability to reason, but loses his compassion, empathy... basically, his soul. That's what we call a vampire."

"So when he goes through the change, his ability to care for others is lost?" Dodger asked carefully.

"Exactly. He... or she... remembers their former life, but they feel no attachment to anyone. They are driven by their hunger and kill for the sheer pleasure of it." Rafe said seriously.

"And you said that it comes in stages." Dodger said carefully.

"Yes. There are some that are low functioning, like some of their intelligence was lost in the change. Some come through with pretty much the same intelligence they had before, and there are a rare few who are smarter as a result of the change. Those are the most dangerous. We call them demons." Rafe said frankly.

"Werewolves, vampires, demons... where does that leave you?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Those of us who made the change and retained our souls are sometimes called... um... angels."

Chapter 7

"You're called angels?" Dodger asked in astonishment.

"Wait there just a second, I'll show you why that is." Rafe said, then dashed into the kitchen.

Dodger rested back into his chair and stared at the fire, not even having a clue as to what he was thinking or feeling.

* * * * *

"Do you see this?" Rafe asked as he placed a plate with a cookie on it on the table beside Dodger's chair.

"Yes." Dodger said cautiously.

"That's my cookie." Rafe said firmly. "Don't eat my cookie."

"I won't." Dodger said slowly.

"Now look into my eyes." Rafe said as he squatted before Dodger.

"What..." Dodger started to ask, then he saw Rafe's eyes alight with the most beautiful, enrapturing expression. The room behind Rafe dulled and faded away, as if it had only been a dream. Rafe seemed to be emitting his own illumination. In fact, Dodger could almost make out a faint glow surrounding Rafe's head.

He blinked and saw that the light seemed to radiate out and wash away from Rafe's back like wings. He was absolutely the most beautiful, incredible, majestic sight that Dodger had ever seen.

"What are you doing Dodger?" Rafe asked playfully.

Dodger looked down at his hand and realized that he was eating the cookie.

"I'm sorry." Dodger said, then blinked again.

Rafe chuckled, then went to sit in his own chair.

"Did you just control my mind?" Dodger asked shakily.

"A little bit. But that's about as much as I can do." Rafe said honestly. "I don't know if it's some sort of extra sensory thing we haven't learned to detect or maybe some sort of hypnosis. Others that practice with the thrall can use it a lot more subtly than I. Leila is exceptionally good at using it."

"Leila..." Dodger said thoughtfully, then said, "Her performance! That's what she was really doing that night, enthralling all of us."

Rafe smiled as he said, "That's right, we both saw the same show but appreciated different things about it."

Dodger looked at Rafe, then realized that they had been diverted from the original purpose of their conversation.

"What's the real story about you needing to leave?" Dodger asked quietly.

"I was telling the truth. They've found an immunity case." Rafe said seriously. "A twelve year old boy who was exposed to the transformative... multiple times, and didn't go through the change."

"So that's rare?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"He's the first. Ever." Rafe said frankly.

"Oh. And if he's really immune, what then?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Then maybe we can come up with a way to restore a person who has been exposed. Return them to being a brightsider." Rafe said hopefully.

"A what?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Oh, that's what a few of us have started calling people like you, who live in the light." Rafe said shyly.

"I'm a brightsider?" Dodger asked with a smile.

"Yes. And we call the werewolves, vampires and demons darksiders, since their instincts drive them into the dark." Rafe said carefully.

"What does that make you?"

"A shadesider." Rafe said timidly. "We can't live in the light, but we live close to it... in the shade."

"So you think that you might be able to turn darksiders back into brightsiders if you can find out why the kid in New Mexico is immune." Dodger said carefully.

"Yes, or possibly allow them to change enough to restore their sense of humanity, which would make them shadesiders." Rafe said seriously.

"It sounds like something that could change the world." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"Our world, yes." Rafe said quietly.

"So, what about us?" Dodger asked as he looked Rafe in the eyes. "Can an angel and a hoopie become a couple?"

"There's a problem with that." Rafe said quietly.

"Which is?" Dodger asked hesitantly.

"The transformative. It lives in me. It's part of me." Rafe said with regret.

"Which means that we couldn't have a sexual relationship." Dodger said slowly, then gave an ironic chuckle before saying, "And that used to be the thing that I was most afraid of."

"It's more complicated than that." Rafe said hesitantly.

"Then explain it to me." Dodger said imploringly.

"The place where I'm going, it's sort of a haven for shadesiders." Rafe said cautiously.

"Meaning, brightsiders aren't welcomed?" Dodger asked hesitantly.

"That's right." Rafe said with a sigh. "It's a ranch on the continental divide. They moved there because it's so far from any brightside community. They just want to be left alone."

"So, can't you take the immunity case somewhere else?" Dodger asked carefully.

"It would be possible, but considering how long this could take, the isolation makes the ranch ideal for our needs." Rafe said apologetically.

"So, what about us?" Dodger asked again.

Rafe closed his eyes, then hung his head and said, "I don't know, Dodger."

"What are the choices?" Dodger asked as he tried to remain calm.

"I could stay here." Rafe said quietly.

"Which you won't do." Dodger said immediately.

Rafe reluctantly nodded, then said, "Or I could go and you could stay here."

Dodger waited for a moment, then said, "Or you could change me into a shadesider, to be like you."

"No." Rafe said immediately. "You could die, or you could become a darksider."

"Rafe, the night that you found me in the park... I expected to die. My life should have ended that night, but an angel came to my rescue." Dodger said quietly. "You've given me three wonderful months of a life that I never could have imagined before. If it ends now, I have no regrets."

"We'll find another way." Rafe said quickly.

"No, Rafe. We won't." Dodger said as he looked into Rafe's eyes. "Rafe, do you see me as a boy who needs you to protect him?"

"I've never thought of you that way." Rafe said in astonishment.

Dodger smiled at the immediate and sincere answer before saying, "Then please trust me when I tell you that I understand the risk. People choose to risk their lives every day, and a lot of them for less reason. I love you Rafe, I hope that my love for you is strong enough to carry me through the transformation to be with you."

Rafe stared at Dodger, not knowing what to say.

"It's pretty simple, really. All my choices will leave me dead, or wishing I was. There's only one choice that promises any hope at the life that I've been dreaming of... a life with you." Dodger said frankly. "I choose life."

"If you're really sure that this is what you want, there are a few ways that we could do it." Rafe said hesitantly.

"Wait. Is it going to be any problem that you're, something like ten years older than me?" Dodger thought to ask.

Rafe chuckled, then said, "There is an age difference, but it's not 10 years, it's closer to 600 years. And no, no one that matters will have a problem with it. Age is seen as an arbitrary number on the shadeside."

"Okay then, you were saying that there's different ways that we could do this." Dodger said a little bit nervously.

"Well, I could inject you with my blood." Rafe said quietly.

Dodger nodded that he understood that.

"Or I could bite you." Rafe said slowly.

Dodger tensed a little bit, but nodded that he understood that too.

"Or... um, I could make love to you." Rafe said shyly.

"You mean like..." Dodger began to ask, but couldn't think of how to say it.

Rafe nodded, then added, "And I can make sure that it doesn't hurt."

"Um, I think I know which way I'd like, but it's not just up to me." Dodger said nervously.

"Well, historically, the second method has the highest incidence of making vampires, the third method has the most success at making shadesiders." Rafe said cautiously.

"Rafe, what do you want?" Dodger asked as he met Rafe's eyes. "Do you want me like that? Would you feel comfortable having sex with me that way?"

"Not having sex, Dodger. Making love." Rafe said seriously. "And do I want you like that? I've been dreaming about making love to you for months. But it's always been a dream... a hopeless dream. I knew that there was no way that it could ever really happen."

"Is there any reason that we aren't making love, right now?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"No, but I'll need a few things to make it easier for you." Rafe said slowly.

"Do you have those things here, I mean, in the house?" Dodger asked curiously.

Rafe nodded that he did.

"Then let's go do it." Dodger said and stood.

His gaze fell on the diploma beside his chair, and he turned to Rafe and said, "If things don't work out... will you send my diploma to my family?"

"I'll take care of it." Rafe said, as tears welled in his eyes.

"Come on." Dodger said as he offered his hand to Rafe.

"Dodger, yes." Rafe said quietly as he accepted Dodger's hand.

"Yes?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"I'll commit to you. I love you. Forever."

* * * * *

In the three months that they had lived together, Dodger had never gone into Rafe's room before. He had never even peeked in the door.

Rafe had never told him that he couldn't enter, but he had always felt like this was Rafe's personal, private place. Just as Dodger's room had always been a place of sanctuary and security for him.

As Dodger stepped into the large, dimly lit room, his first impression was that the room was elegant, but not overly ornate.

A huge fourposter bed was the central feature of the room. It was made of the same dark wood as the furniture in Dodger's room. But where Dodger's room was done in light, airy fabrics, Rafe's seemed to be filled with heavier fabrics of dark scarlet and trimmed in gold.

As Dodger looked around the room, one thing caught his attention. Something that seemed to be totally out of place.

Rafe noticed his stare and guiltily said, "Sometimes watching Johnny Carson helps me relax so I can sleep."

Dodger grinned at the small television perched on the corner of the dresser, then turned his loving gaze on Rafe.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Rafe asked gently.

"Yes." Dodger said with conviction. "Rafe. I've had months to think about my future. And I know that any future without you isn't one that I want to live in."

"But you could stay here and have a good life. I could make sure that you'd never want for anything." Rafe said imploringly.

"I'd want for you." Dodger said frankly. "Every minute of every day, I'd want for you."

"There's no way I'm going to talk you out of this, is there?" Rafe asked quietly.

"Sure, there's an easy way." Dodger said seriously.

"How's that?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"Just look me in the eyes and tell me that you don't love me." Dodger said frankly. "It's that simple."

Rafe took a step closer to Dodger, then looked deeply into his eyes.

Dodger watched carefully, wanting to detect the slightest hesitation, any sign of falsehood in his declaration.

Finally Rafe said, "I do love you, Dodger."

"I know." Dodger said with a grin.

"You do?" Rafe asked with an answering smile.

"Yeah. Now go get what you need to get while I get more comfortable." Dodger said, then waggled his eyebrows garishly.

Rafe chuckled at the expression, then dashed out of the room.

* * * * *

As Dodger undressed, he noticed that his hands were shaking.

He kept reminding himself that Rafe had said that it wouldn't be painful, that it could be pleasurable.

Of course, a little voice intruded that painful or not, he might either die or lose his soul tonight.

But his course had been set. His choices were made and he knew, deep in his bones, that they were the right ones.

As Dodger took the final step and removed his underwear, he felt very self-conscious. He had the urge to dive into the bed and hide under the covers, but forced himself to resist the adolescent urge and behave like a man.

He lay back on the velvety dark crimson blanket and did his best to arrange himself in a comfortable and somewhat provocative pose.

* * * * *

Rafe entered the room and froze at the sight before him.

There was Dodger, completely nude, fully reclined and unashamed.

He had always thought Dodger was a handsome young man, even more so since his first visit to Lily's.

But the young man who was now before him was a study in absolute perfection. And the thing that made Dodger that much more attractive was his genuine and unassuming personality. Rafe had met so many

people in his long life who behaved contrary to their nature because it was expected of them. But if Dodger ever went against his nature, it was only because he had yet to fully understand what it was.

His gaze settled on Dodger's manhood, which was lying semi-erect against one leg. Rafe hadn't known what to expect in this regard. There just wasn't any accurate predictor of such things in his experience.

It was perfect. Uncut. Not too big to be practical, not too small to be of use.

"Would you like to join me?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"Yes." Rafe said as he quickly set down the things he had gone to retrieve.

"What's that?" Dodger asked as he looked at the tubes and damp towel on the nightstand.

"Well, the white one is lubrication. That will just make things easier." Rafe said as he quickly undressed.

"And the other one?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"An anesthetic ointment." Rafe said quietly. "I promised you no pain. I have it here just in case it's needed."

"But if you kill the pain, you kill the pleasure too, right?" Dodger asked thoughtfully.

"That's right." Rafe said seriously.

"Thanks for thinking of that. I hope we won't need it, but I'll let you know." Dodger said slowly.

"Would you like to get under the covers?" Rafe asked as he sat on the edge of the bed.

Dodger looked at him and realized that Rafe had finished undressing while his attention was elsewhere.

"Yeah. If you want to." Dodger said hesitantly as he looked at Rafe's naked body.

Even though Rafe looked fantastic in the suits that George made for him, they didn't give any hints to the wonderfully toned and sculpted body that was concealed beneath.

Rafe didn't look like a body builder, but he had a very fit and athletic appearance. Like a swimmer or a dancer.

Dodger appreciated the leanness of Rafe's form as he stood. Dodger's eyes followed a black wispy trail of hair down Rafe's stomach to a nest of dark curls that looked to be as soft as gossamer.

He felt a smile cross his face at the sight of the awakening manhood before him.

Of course, Dodger had tried to imagine what Rafe would look like when he was naked. The reality of his body turned out to be better than Dodger's best daydream. But this, the awakening erection, was EXACTLY what he had envisioned.

"Get off the bed so I can pull back the covers." Rafe said gently.

"Oh, um... yeah." Dodger said nervously, then hopped off the bed.

* * * * *

Once they were under the covers, Dodger reluctantly admitted, "I don't know what to do."

"What do you want to do?" Rafe asked gently.

"Hold you." Dodger said quietly.

"That sounds nice." Rafe said with a smile.

Dodger awkwardly moved to Rafe's side and tried to snuggle against him, but it didn't feel right, it was like he was trying to fit a puzzle piece where it didn't belong.

"Um, let me try something." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"Anything you want." Rafe said gently.

Dodger scooted back a little, then guided Rafe to lie on his back.

Once he was happy with Rafe's position, Dodger climbed on top of him and lay down, chest to chest with Rafe and looked down into his eyes.

"Much better." Dodger said happily.

"I agree." Rafe said with a smile.

Dodger was aware of the coolness of Rafe's body, but didn't find the sensation unpleasant at all.

He moved in to give Rafe a gentle kiss.

His uncertainty made the kiss more tentative than affectionate, but the end result was nonetheless sweet.

Rafe decided that Dodger might need a little bit of guidance, so he moved one hand to the back of Dodger's head and urged him to kiss more firmly.

Dodger went along willingly and appreciated the encouragement.

"You taste nice." Dodger whispered.

"So do you." Rafe said gently.

"I don't know... what do we do next?" Dodger asked shyly.

"We do what feels good." Rafe said simply.

"Do you think you could give me another hint?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"Well, since the day that I met you, I've always wanted to do this." Rafe said, and guided Dodger to lean closer, then started to nuzzle his neck and nibble on his ear lobe.

"That tickles." Dodger chuckled.

"What about this?" Rafe whispered gently.

The cool breath against Dodger's ear awakened a fire deep within him.

He could feel the desire spreading through his body like an electrical charge as his manhood awakened.

"That did something." Dodger whispered into Rafe's ear.

"Yes. I can feel that." Rafe said in a low, rumbling voice, then brought one hand slowly down Dodger's side to come to rest on his hip.

Dodger's desire overrode his hesitance and he moved back to Rafe's mouth to give him a more forceful kiss.

Rafe opened his mouth and it only took a moment for Dodger to realize what he was supposed to do.

As Dodger's tongue ventured inside, it encountered Rafe's tongue. The touch as the tongues slid against each other ignited a passion in Dodger that he never imagined. A fire within him burned and he wanted more.

Both of Rafe's hands were now exploring, up and down Dodger's body.

When one of his hands would come to rest on Dodger's butt, he noticed that Dodger would begin to squirm and wiggle against him, grinding his erection into Rafe's hip.

"Do you like that?" Rafe asked quietly.

"Yes." Dodger moaned. "More."

Rafe moved both hands to Dodger's butt and held him still for a moment, then he experimentally thrust into the space between their bodies.

"That's nice." Dodger whispered.

Taking firm hold of Dodger's butt, Rafe guided him to begin thrusting.

"Yesssss." Dodger moaned.

Rafe smiled at the reaction, then realized that things might go too far if they continued the way they were.

"Lie on your back. There's something that I want to show you." Rafe said gently.

"But I was enjoying that." Dodger said cautiously.

"I think you'll enjoy this even more." Rafe said as he urged Dodger from on top of him and down to the bed at his side.

Dodger went along, but would like to have remained on top of Rafe. He loved the feeling of closeness. He felt safe being held against Rafe's chest. He felt cherished.

"Relax." Rafe said, as he pulled down the covers and got on all fours.

Dodger lay on the bed and looked at Rafe above him.

He was magnificent.

Rafe began to trail his fingers down Dodger's chest, then, just before reaching his erection, he changed direction and began to move back up.

"Oh! Come on!" Dodger whined.

Rafe chuckled at the reaction, then said, "I'll take pity on you."

Dodger was about to respond, then gasped as Rafe took Dodger's engorged member into his mouth.

Rafe moved slowly, circling his tongue around the loose hood of Dodger's foreskin, then dipped inside.

"Yes." Dodger gasped.

Rafe moved down Dodger's shaft slowly, then sucked gently as he drew back.

"Oh God! Yes." Dodger groaned, never having imagined that anything could feel so good.

As much as Rafe wanted to continue and give Dodger every possible pleasure, he knew that they needed to progress and start his transformation.

"Raise your legs." Rafe said as he guided Dodger to bring up his knees.

"Don't stop!" Dodger whimpered, not wanting the wonderful feeling to ever end.

"I'm not stopping, just moving on." Rafe said gently, then started to slowly lick one of Dodger's balls.

"Oh... that! Yeah, do that!" Dodger gasped.

Rafe chuckled as he gave the other ball equal attention.

"Oh yeah! Rafe, yeah!" Dodger moaned.

Rafe didn't know how Dodger was going to react to his next move. But considering Dodger's lack of experience and extremely limited knowledge, he felt that he needed to be introduced to the idea in a nonthreatening way.

"What are you..." Dodger began to say, then fell silent as Rafe slowly and methodically worked his way ever closer to Dodger's most private opening.

Rafe lifted his head and whispered, "Hand me a pillow."

Dodger puzzled over the words for a moment, then finally made enough sense of them to snag a pillow from beside his head and hand it down.

"Lift up." Rafe said as he encouraged Dodger to raise his hips.

Dodger did as he was told, then was rewarded by the return of the wonderful sensations on his erection.

Rafe devoted some attention to Dodger's straining manhood, then worked the balls on his way further down.

Since Dodger's lower back was now supported by a pillow. Rafe had easy access to his target.

"You're not..." Dodger began to say, then gasped as Rafe began to circle the puckered opening with his tongue.

When Dodger made no further protests, Rafe experimentally probed inside.

"Yessss." Dodger hissed.

Rafe felt a little relief at the reaction.

He had been concerned that due to Dodger's limited knowledge that he might be more resistant to this aspect of their lovemaking.

"That's good, Rafe." Dodger said past his panting breaths, "More."

Rafe leaned off the edge of the bed and snagged the tube of lubrication before getting back to work, starting with Dodger's erection again.

"Yeah Rafe. Do that. Lots of that." Dodger said as he writhed with pleasure.

Rafe squeezed some lube onto his fingers, then began to massage Dodger's opening with one finger, allowing it to dip in briefly and slightly.

"More Rafe. Give me more, I'll tell you when it's too much." Dodger said firmly.

Rafe was a little bit surprised, but thought that if Dodger could ask for it, then he would oblige.

He slowly and carefully began to work one finger in, massaging as he went.

"Yes. More." Dodger gasped.

Rafe went a little bit faster, in and out, rotating as he went to spread the lube as well as to relax the muscle.

"C'mon Rafe. I've been thinking about us this for months, I'm ready." Dodger said seriously, then added somewhat urgently, "More."

After a moment of hesitation, Rafe worked his whole finger in.

"Yes." Dodger said with relief.

Since he found himself right where he needed to be, Rafe felt around with his finger until he found the little bump, hidden deep inside Dodger.

"Oh God!" Dodger gasped as a shiver ran through his entire body.

Rafe smiled, then withdrew his finger.

"Don't stop!" Dodger demanded.

"I'm getting there. You're not ready yet." Rafe said seriously.

"I'm ready!" Dodger demanded. "Do that again."

Rafe lubed up two fingers, then carefully worked them in, just a little.

"Oof." Dodger said and seemed to tense up.

"Relax, we're half way there." Rafe said gently as he waited for the muscle to allow him entry.

Dodger let out a breath that he didn't realize he had been holding and felt the muscle slowly release.

"That's good, you're doing fine." Rafe said with approval as he started a slight thrusting motion and swiveled the two fingers.

"Yes. That's good." Dodger began to say, then let out a little yelp when Rafe brushed his prostate again.

"Oh Rafe... That's so good." Dodger whispered.

"Ready for more?" Rafe asked gently.

"I'm ready for you. I want you Rafe, please." Dodger begged.

"Just a little more." Rafe said gently as he withdrew and lubed three fingers.

"Do it." Dodger said in a voice that sounded like a growl.

"Push out, like you're going to the toilet." Rafe said as he pressed three fingers at Dodger's slightly dilated opening.

The three fingers went in more easily than Rafe expected.

"Please Rafe. Hurry and finish that. I want you." Dodger said desperately.

Rafe worked the three fingers in and out a few times, just to be sure that Dodger was sufficiently stretched, then he moved up Dodger's body to look him in the eyes.

The feverish lust-crazed look that Dodger gave him made his heart flutter.

No one he had ever been with before had wanted him so badly. No one had ever begged him before.

"This is the last chance. Once I do this, it can't be undone." Rafe said seriously.

"Please Rafe. Do it. Make love to me." Dodger pleaded.

"I love you, Dodger." Rafe said solemnly, then reached down and lined up his erection.

"I love you, too."

"Push out." Rafe said gently as he pressed against the opening ever so slightly.

He felt Dodger's pushing, then pressed forward slightly.

"More." Dodger said past gritted teeth.

"You need to get used to it." Rafe warned.

"I need it to MOVE." Dodger said firmly.

Rafe thrust forward and Dodger tensed at the motion.

"Did I hurt you?" Rafe asked with concern.

"No, but you're going to kill me if you don't do something. Come on!" Dodger demanded.

Rafe was over half way in, so he decided to push in the rest of the way.

"Yesssss." Dodger hissed in satisfaction.

Rafe experimentally thrust, but didn't get the result that he wanted.

He spread his knees wider to change his angle, then thrust again.

He felt Dodger's body shudder at his movement.

Confident that he had found Dodger's prostate, Rafe began thrusting in a slow steady rhythm.

"More." Dodger wheezed.

Rafe was concerned by the pallor of Dodger's skin, but the sex-crazed look in Dodger's eyes assured him that all was well.

"I love you Dodger." Rafe said as he began to thrust harder and faster.

"I love you, too, Rafe." Dodger said as he writhed in pleasure.

Once Rafe had found his rhythm, he leaned forward, so he could better see Dodger's face.

Dodger was absolutely beautiful.

His eyes were wild and his hair was slightly damp from sweat.

Rafe couldn't believe that Dodger could possibly be more beautiful than he already was. But Dodger, filled with passion, trapped between need and ecstasy was the most incredible thing Rafe had ever seen.

"Love you." Dodger panted, then seemed to focus on Rafe's face, just above him.

Dodger grabbed firmly onto Rafe's shoulders and pulled himself up to give Rafe a deep firm kiss.

Rafe felt his passion reach another plateau as his thrusting increased. He was nearly pulling all the way out and slamming back in with every thrust now. And from Dodger's reaction, he was clipping the prostate every time.

"Love you. Love you." Dodger panted against Rafe's lips.

"I love you forever." Rafe said in response, then felt the unmistakable sense of passing the point of no return.

He thrust deep, and held it as he felt his seed release.

Dodger clutched Rafe's shoulders tighter, then, at the feeling of what was happening inside him, Dodger achieved his own climax.

"Love you." Dodger whispered, then another spasm of release caused his entire body to tense.

"Love you, Dodger." Rafe declared as he felt his semen release, again and again.

"Love you." Dodger whispered as his hold on Rafe's shoulders loosened.

"I love you too." Rafe said gently, finally feeling an end to the most incredible orgasm of his long life.

"Oh Rafe. That was... is it always like that?" Dodger asked past panting breaths.

Rafe chuckled at the question, then said, "No Dodger. That was special."

Dodger looked into Rafe's eyes, then quietly asked, "So that's it. I mean, for the virus thing? It's done?"

"It's done." Rafe agreed.

"So what do we do now?" Dodger asked quietly.

"Well, I don't know about you, but I'm ready to go back to what we started with." Rafe said with a smile.

Dodger puzzled over what Rafe was talking about.

Rafe slowly withdrew from Dodger, then grabbed the damp towel and quickly cleaned them up.

He casually tossed the towel back on the nightstand, then moved over on the bed to lay beside Dodger.

"If you feel up to it, I'd really like for you to hold me again. That was really nice." Rafe said as he rested on his back.

"Yeah." Dodger said with a smile. "I liked that, too."

"Come on." Rafe whispered, then guided Dodger to lie on top of him, chest to chest.

"I love you, Rafe." Dodger whispered.

"I love you, too, Dodger." Rafe said with a smile.

"When will we know if it worked?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"It can take up to twelve hours to completely finish." Rafe said seriously.

"Twelve hours?" Dodger asked with surprise.

"Yes, but the... unpleasant part will take place in the next two hours." Rafe said gently.

"Like what?" Dodger asked curiously.

Rafe snuggled Dodger a little bit tighter against his chest, then said, "Well, your skin will be one of the first things effected. You'll start becoming super sensitive."

"That doesn't sound too bad." Dodger said slowly.

"No. In fact, being like this, it may be nice." Rafe said with a smile.

"What else, then?" Dodger asked seriously. "I'd like to know what to expect, so it doesn't freak me out."

"You might sweat blood or cry blood. But it doesn't hurt. It's just a little bit disconcerting if you're not expecting it." Rafe said slowly.

"I can handle that." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"You might become nauseous or start vomiting. It's unpleasant, but doesn't last long." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. Okay." Dodger said unenthusiastically.

"As your gastrointestinal tract completes the change, it will flush out any undigested... um, you'll have to go to the toilet a time or two. It can be... um, bad."

"I can do that." Dodger said with resignation.

"There are a few other things that could happen, but they're not worth worrying about since they're more rare." Rafe said frankly.

"Well, if that's it, that doesn't sound too horrible." Dodger said frankly.

"Oh no, it's not agonizing or anything." Rafe said assuringly.

"Unless I die." Dodger said quietly.

Rafe looked at Dodger carefully, then asked, "How are you feeling?"

"A little bit hot, but okay besides that." Dodger said slowly.

"How about, back there? Did I hurt you?" Rafe asked with concern.

Dodger chuckled and said, "No. You were being so gentle and careful that I thought you were going to drive me out of my mind."

Rafe smiled at the statement, then said, "I promise that I'll go faster next time."

"Next time?" Dodger asked with interest.

"I think I can safely say that we're past one of the hurdles. So we just have one left to worry about." Rafe said frankly.

"What are you talking about?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"If your body were going to reject the transformative, you would be having an adverse reaction by now. I think it's safe to say that you aren't going to die." Rafe said seriously.

"So the next thing we have to worry about is me losing my soul." Dodger said quietly.

"Yes." Rafe said simply.

"Is there anything that we can do to make that not happen?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"Well, from a scientific standpoint, I'd have to say no. But there's sort of an old wives tale that if you're making love during the transformation, that your soul will fight to stay where it's loved." Rafe said frankly.

"I say we listen to the old wives." Dodger said, as he looked lovingly into Rafe's eyes.

"Um, Dodger. I may have enhanced speed and endurance, but it's probably going to take me a few minutes before I'm ready to go again." Rafe said hesitantly.

"I don't think you need sex to make love." Dodger said thoughtfully. "I mean, it's nice. But I don't think it's necessary."

"Good point." Rafe said with a smile.

"Besides, maybe I'd like to try doing that to you. It looked like you were having fun." Dodger said with a grin.

"I was." Rafe chuckled, then looked Dodger in the eyes and whispered, "But just so you know... I've never done that."

"What you just did to me, you've never had that done to you?" Dodger asked with surprise.

"The few male lovers that I've had wanted me to service them. No one ever wanted me that way." Rafe said frankly.

"Well, I want you, Rafe." Dodger said seriously.

"Are you sure?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"Absolutely." Dodger said firmly, then added more quietly, "But you'll have to tell me what to do. I was a little bit distracted, just then."

"I'll be happy to talk you through it whenever you want." Rafe said gently.

"Then let's get to it!" Dodger said happily.

At Rafe's look of surprise, Dodger said, "You may be a shadesider, but I'm a teenager. I can go again in two minutes."

Rafe chuckled, then said, "Grab that pillow and the white tube of lubrication."

* * * * *

"Dodger?" Rafe said hesitantly.

"Yeah." Dodger said as he thrust in long, even strokes.

"How are you feeling?" Rafe asked with concern.

"Well, I'm buried in you up to the root, so I'd have to say I'm feeling pretty good. Why?" Dodger asked, somewhat distractedly.

"You're crying blood." Rafe said carefully.

"Tears of joy." Dodger said dismissively, then began to thrust harder.

"But you feel okay?" Rafe asked slowly.

"Yeah. But if you can still talk, I must not be doing this right." Dodger said firmly.

"There's a thing men have, it's called the prostate. If you can hit it when you thrust, that should get the result you're going for." Rafe said cautiously.

"How do I do that?" Dodger asked as he slowed his pace.

"Probably angle your thrusts a little more upward." Rafe said thoughtfully.

Dodger scooted his legs forward slightly and further apart, then asked, "Like this?"

"Ungh!" Rafe groaned as Dodger hit the mark.

"I guess that's it." Dodger said happily as he worked to ring the bell with every thrust.

"Oh Dodger!" Rafe gasped, then his eyes rolled back in awe of the waves of pleasure coursing through him. "I never imagined it would feel like this."

"I love you, Rafe." Dodger said as his thrusts increased in speed and intensity.

"Love. Love. Love." Rafe chugged with each thrust.

Dodger remembered what Rafe had done earlier, and after a few tries, managed to lean forward, over Rafe without changing his angle.

"Love you." Rafe gasped, then pulled himself up and kissed Dodger with years worth of unspent passion.

Dodger marveled at the sight of his straight laced and reserved Dr. Killian reduced to this lust crazed state.

He was breathtaking.

This was almost like seeing Rafe when he was enthralled, except this was better, because it was for real.

"I'm... I'm... " Rafe fought to say, but couldn't form the next word.

"Do it Rafe. Give it to me." Dodger said as he pumped harder, only moments away from his own climax.

"I love you, Dodger." Rafe forced out, then arched his back as he released his cream.

The sight of the expression on Rafe's face brought Dodger back to what he had once imagined it must be like... there was no comparison. The Rafe before him was infinitely better than the Rafe of his dreams.

Dodger's climax hit like a jolt of electricity, flowing through his entire body.

Never in his life had he felt anything to compare. Wave after wave after wave of pleasure tried to sweep him away. He kept thrusting, pounding and feeling spasm after spasm of release wash out of him.

"Rafe." He gasped, then the world narrowed to a pinpoint of light before going completely dark.

* * * * *

"Dodger?" Rafe called in panic.

"Rafe?" Dodger asked in confusion.

"How do you feel?" Rafe asked nervously.

"I... don't know." Dodger answered honestly.

The terror in Rafe's expression snapped him out of his fog and he realized what Rafe was afraid of.

"I love you, Rafe." Dodger said seriously.

"Really?" Rafe asked hopefully.

"Forever." Dodger said firmly.

Rafe sighed with relief, then gave Dodger a firm kiss.

After the kiss broke, Dodger whispered, "I'm sorry I scared you."

"You passed out and... I didn't know what was wrong." Rafe babbled.

"I think I overloaded on pleasure." Dodger admitted shyly.

"I suppose that since all your senses are becoming more acute, that could happen." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"No, Rafe." Dodger said firmly, then whispered, "You're just that good."

Rafe puzzled over the words for a moment then broke into a smile and said, "I guess I can accept that."

"Good." Dodger said with a chuckle.

"How are you feeling?" Rafe asked quietly.

"Like I want to hold you in my arms and kiss you and make love to you forever and ever and never let you go." Dodger said joyfully.

"Me too." Rafe said quickly, "But are you feeling sick to your stomach or anything like that?"

"Thirsty." Dodger said suddenly, only just realizing it.

"I have something for that." Rafe said as he hopped out of the bed.

"I love you." Dodger said with a smile.

"I love you, too." Rafe said before dashing out the bedroom door.

* * * * *

While Rafe was out of the room, Dodger scooted himself up on the bed and arranged the pillows so they would be more comfortable.

As he was tidying things up, he noticed that the sheets were ripped. Upon closer inspection, he found that the mattress underneath was ripped too.

After a moment of thought, Dodger moved down the bed and positioned himself roughly where he was when he was making love to Rafe.

The holes in the sheets and mattress matched up almost perfectly to where he had braced himself on his hand.

"Is something wrong?" Rafe asked as he walked into the room, carrying two glasses of juice.

"I think I tore a hole in your mattress." Dodger said shyly.

Rafe leaned over a little to look at the hole, then said, "Imagine that."

"You're not upset are you?" Dodger asked quietly.

"Upset? I'm taking it as a compliment." Rafe said with a chuckle, then handed Dodger a glass of juice.

"Is this 'your' juice?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Yes. I think you'll like it more, now." Rafe said seriously.

Dodger took a hesitant drink and the juice tasted like paradise.

The sweetness calmed him, the thickness soothed him and the coppery twang quenched the thirst that had been growing in him.

"This is wonderful." Dodger said in amazement.

"It's some of my best work." Rafe said proudly.

"You made this?" Dodger asked with surprise.

"Yes. At least, I developed it. I sold my formula for shares in the company that produces it." Rafe said happily.

"And because of this..." Dodger said as he held up his glass, "...we don't have to drink blood?"

"That's right." Rafe said happily.

"You're a good man, Dr. Killian." Dodger said as he raised his glass to Rafe in a toast.

"And I'm yours." Rafe said as he touched glasses with Dodger before taking a drink.

* * * * *

Over the course of the next few hours, Dodger and Rafe cuddled, snuggled, and generally loved each other.

Dodger went through each of the stages as expected, but since Rafe had warned him about them, none of them were overly traumatic.

"Rafe, something is happening to my face." Dodger said with concern as he brought his hands up to feel on both sides of his nose.

"That's a good sign." Rafe said with a smile.

"But what is it? It feels like it's flinching or crawling." Dodger said in discomfort.

"Just relax and let it happen. What you're feeling is a muscle complex that is developing behind some of your teeth, the canines to be precise."

"So, what does that mean?" Dodger asked uncomfortably.

"It means that your fangs are about to drop. And when that happens, the change will officially be complete." Rafe said happily.

"Does that mean I made it?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"Well, let's see... you're obviously alive, although you had me worried at one point." Rafe said tenderly.

Dodger nodded.

"You haven't tried to kill me, unless attempted murder by vigorous mind-blowing sex can be counted." Rafe said playfully.

Dodger giggled, then waited.

"Yes Dodger. You made it. Welcome to the shadeside."

Part 2: Rancho de la Noche

Chapter 8

Dodger awoke to the most glorious feeling of being surrounded in warmth and love.

He slowly opened his eyes and found Rafe holding him tenderly in his arms.

"You're warm." Dodger said with a smile.

"Actually, you're cold. At least, compared to what you were." Rafe said gently.

"Well, whatever happened, it's nice." Dodger said as he snuggled in Rafe's embrace.

"How are you feeling?" Rafe asked quietly as he looked into Dodger's eyes.

"I feel perfect." Dodger said joyfully. "I understood what you were saying before about my body working more efficiently, but I never imagined how it would feel. It's like my body was sluggish and bloated before. Now I feel... I can't even find the words. I just feel like I could do anything right now."

"I guess I'll have to take your word for it. Since I was born a shadesider, I've never known what it feels like to be without the transformative." Rafe said frankly.

"So, shadesiders can have kids." Dodger said slowly, then looked at Rafe and said, "For some reason, I didn't think they would be able to."

"It's the vampire myth. People think we're dead." Rafe said dismissively. "But truth be told, it is exceedingly rare for a shadesider to be born. They're usually made."

"Why is it so rare?" Dodger asked curiously.

"I suppose from an evolutionary standpoint, it makes sense because we're so long lived. If a female shadesider could become pregnant as easily as a brightsider... let's just say that that would cause it's own set of problems." Rafe said frankly.

Dodger slowly nodded that he understood what Rafe was saying.

"To answer your question from a medical perspective. The fertility cycle in a female shadesider can go dormant for decades or even centuries. Then one day it will awaken, the next it will be gone and it may be a thousand years before it happens again. There's just no predicting when it will happen." Rafe said casually.

"A thousand years." Dodger said with a shake of his head.

"Please try not to worry too much about it. You're here, now. Live in today. If you try to figure out what you'll be doing a thousand years from now, you'll drive yourself crazy." Rafe said with a grin.

"I already know what I'll be doing a thousand years from now." Dodger said with a smile.

At Rafe's curious glance, he said, "I'll be loving you."

"I like that plan." Rafe said with a grin.

Dodger smiled, then his look slowly became thoughtful.

"Is something bothering you?" Rafe asked curiously.

Dodger thought for a moment, then quietly asked, "Am I always going to look like I'm sixteen?"

"Probably not." Rafe said casually. "But Shadesider aging is kind of a tricky thing to predict."

"How do you mean?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"In a way, it's like the fertility. You might go two or three hundred years looking like you are right now, or you might age normally for a few years then stop. No one has figured out what causes it to start or stop."

"Does that mean that eventually we'll grow old and die like brightsiders?" Dodger asked quietly.

"I don't think so." Rafe said thoughtfully. "At least, I've never known of that happening to anyone."

Dodger nodded that he had heard.

"When you meet my parents, you might ask them about it. They would know better than I would." Rafe said seriously.

"How do you think they'll react when they find out about me?" Dodger asked hesitantly.

"If I were going to guess, I'd say that they'll absolutely love you." Rafe said tenderly.

"But what if they don't?" Dodger asked with concern.

"Why wouldn't they?" Rafe asked curiously.

"Well, I'm a sixteen year old dirt poor hoopie. Oh, and I'm a guy. I doubt that I'm what your parents were dreaming of for their only son." Dodger said defensively.

"I love you." Rafe said as he looked into Dodger's eyes. "That's all that matters to me, and it's all that will matter to them. I promise."

Dodger didn't look convinced, but didn't seem to want to pursue the topic further.

"I would love for us to stay in bed and make love all day, but I have some phone calls that I have to make to get things arranged for us to get to New Mexico as soon as possible." Rafe finished regretfully.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"Yes. If you wouldn't mind, you could make us breakfast while I make my calls." Rafe said seriously.

"Is there anything special you'd like for breakfast?" Dodger asked gently.

"Surprise me." Rafe said with a grin.

"I think I'll take that as a challenge." Dodger said with a chuckle.

"One kiss, then we'd better get started." Rafe said lovingly.

Dodger slowly moved in to give Rafe a kiss filled with all the love he was feeling.

Rafe's hands drifted down Dodger's back, seemingly of their own accord.

Dodger responded to the faint touches and began to slowly grind his growing erection against Rafe's hip.

"I'd rather do this than have breakfast." Dodger whispered against Rafe's lips.

"I think we can do both." Rafe said, then moved in to kiss Dodger in earnest.

* * * * *

"Something smells good." Rafe said as he walked into the kitchen.

"Well, I was thinking that if we're going to be leaving, we might as well use up some of this food." Dodger said as he moved from the stove to the electric griddle.

"Can I help with something?" Rafe asked curiously.

"Sure, take over the griddle and I'll check on the biscuits." Dodger said happily.

"You made biscuits? I haven't been in there that long." Rafe said cautiously.

"Not your forever-and-a-day biscuits." Dodger said with a grin, then peeked into the oven. "My mama's drop biscuits."

"'Drop' biscuits?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"Yup. You just mix it up, scoop up a clump of dough, then drop it on the pan. They ain't pretty, but they get the job done." Dodger said frankly.

"I can't wait to try them." Rafe said with a grin.

"I'm thinking we got about a minute left and everything will be finished." Dodger said as he hurried to the cabinet to grab two plates. "Oh, and we're just about out of juice."

"No problem. I have some more in the shop." Rafe said casually.

"The shop?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Yes. The shop behind the garage. I have a refrigerator full of juice in there." Rafe said as he moved strips of bacon to a towel to drain.

"I guess I never went behind the garage. I didn't know it was there."

"There's not much to it. It's just a big tool shed with a few work tables in case I get the urge to do something creative with wood." Rafe said casually.

"Do you get that urge often?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Only when I'm exceptionally bored." Rafe said with a grin.

"70% hash, 30% brown." Dodger said as he placed hashed browns on one of the plates.

"Just the way I like it." Rafe said with a grin.

"I just hope you're hungry."

"We have to do something to replace the amount of energy we spent last night." Rafe said as he took the first plate and added scrambled eggs and bacon to it.

Dodger pulled a pan of biscuits out of the oven and set them on top of the stove.

"Those look funny." Rafe said with a smile.

"You told me to surprise you." Dodger said with a cheeky grin.

"Well, you managed to do that." Rafe said as he looked at the odd, misshapen biscuits.

"Don't worry, they'll taste good." Dodger chuckled.

"I can't wait to find out." Rafe said as he picked up the plates and carried them to the table.

Dodger quickly moved the biscuits to a large bowl that was lined with a towel, then picked up the bowl of biscuits with one hand and a pan of sausage gravy with the other.

"I almost forgot the grits." Dodger said as he dashed back to the stove to grab the small saucepan on the back burner.

Rafe placed butter and syrup on the table and took his seat just as Dodger sat down.

"This looks wonderful. Thank you for cooking breakfast this morning." Rafe said sincerely.

"You're welcome. I'm always happy to cook when I know it's appreciated." Dodger said frankly.

"If I ever forget to tell you, I'm counting on you to let me know." Rafe said seriously.

Dodger shook his head, then said, "Even if you never said it, I'd still know."

Rafe smiled at the statement, then took a bite of his breakfast.

"So, were you able to get the travel arrangements made?" Dodger asked between bites.

"Not exactly." Rafe said seriously. "I don't really have the experience to plan something like this. I called Portia and told her what I needed. She's going to call me back."

"Is she a travel agent?" Dodger asked curiously.

"No. She just travels a lot and knows who to go to for shadeside accommodations." Rafe said frankly.

"What's that?" Dodger asked curiously.

"She'll just arrange things so that we can travel comfortably. If worse comes to worse, I can charter a plane to get us there." Rafe said casually.

"That sounds expensive." Dodger said hesitantly.

"It is." Rafe said simply. "If there's a commercial option available, we'll take that. If not, we'll still manage to get there."

Dodger slowly nodded.

"I've also arranged to get you some documentation. We're going to need to hit the road as soon as the sun sets." Rafe said seriously.

"Documentation?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Birth certificate, a driver's license... you know, things like that." Rafe said simply.

"But I was born at the farm. I don't think I have any of that stuff." Dodger said anxiously.

"It's all being handled." Rafe said with an assuring smile. "You'll go and get your picture taken and then you'll be done."

"Is this legal?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Sort of. All the documents that you'll be receiving will be genuine. But the way you're getting them isn't entirely legal by brightside standards." Rafe admitted somewhat shyly, "But by shadeside standards, it's just what you have to do to get your daily business done."

Dodger didn't look convinced, so Rafe continued, "If you wanted to get your birth certificate, what would you do?"

"I don't know. Probably go to some government office and fill out a whole bunch of forms." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"At what time of day would you do that?" Rafe asked slowly.

"Oh. I see what you mean." Dodger said with a nod.

"Right. There are things that are very difficult for us to do. For those things, we turn to the shadeside community." Rafe said happily.

"Okay. So who gets us official documents?" Dodger asked carefully.

"You haven't met him yet. His name is Morgan." Rafe said seriously. "And if you went into the state building in the middle of the day, he'd probably be the one that you'd talk to."

"How can he go out in the daylight?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Just like the rest of us. Some days he goes in around sunrise and leaves at around sunset. On overcast days, he can leave at a more decent hour. But either way, while he's inside, under fluorescent lights, he's safe. Office work was made for shadesiders." Rafe finished with a grin.

"The summer must be really tough with the days being so long." Dodger said with concern.

"Yes. But we do what we have to do." Rafe said simply. "And sometimes that means braving the sunlight to make a mad dash to the car and hope that no one notices."

"How bad is it when you do that?" Dodger asked quietly.

"The skin inflames immediately, blisters start forming within a minute or two. It's agony." Rafe said with resignation.

"When that happens, what do you do?" Dodger asked curiously.

"You get home, or someplace dark, as quickly as you can. Then you drink some juice, put a cold wet towel on your burns and wait for about ten to fifteen minutes for your skin to heal." Rafe said frankly.

"At least we've got the rapid healing going for us." Dodger said with a weak smile.

"We'll avoid testing your healing abilities for a while if at all possible." Rafe said gently.

"As long as that includes both of us." Dodger said seriously.

"I'll do what I can." Rafe said with a smile.

* * * * *

The day was filled with running around, packing, phone calls and the occasional break to kiss or cuddle.

"When do we have to meet Morgan?" Dodger asked curiously from his chair.

"Not for a while, yet. He knows we can't leave until sunset, so he'll have a good idea of when we'll arrive." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"And then we go to the airport?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Yes. But we may stop at the club or at a restaurant if there's time. We'll be taking the last flight leaving for Albuquerque." Rafe said seriously.

"I'm going to miss this place." Dodger said, as he looked around the huge living room.

"You'll be able to come back whenever you want." Rafe said honestly.

Dodger shook his head and said, "It wouldn't be home without you."

Rafe nodded his agreement.

"Did you call Mrs. Lewellyn?" Dodger asked absently.

"Yes. She said that she'll clear the food out of the cupboards and stop by to check on the place occasionally." Rafe said quietly.

Dodger nodded as he stared at the fireplace, feeling that the absence of a fire was somehow appropriate.

"How are you feeling?" Rafe asked cautiously.

Dodger smiled at the question, then said, "I feel better than I have in my entire life."

Rafe nodded, then asked, "And how are you feeling about us going to New Mexico?"

"As long as we're together, I'm not worried about it." Dodger said frankly.

"I know that I'm going to be really busy when we get there. I don't want to neglect you." Rafe said in a worried tone.

"Rafe, I understand that. I'm just happy that I'm going with you." Dodger said gently, then added, "And that I'm alive."

"I'm kind of happy about that, too." Rafe said with a chuckle.

"We'll be fine." Dodger said quietly.

"I love you, Dodger. Forever."

"Forever."

* * * * *

"600 years?" Dodger asked out of nowhere.

"More or less." Rafe responded absently.

Dodger nodded, then watched the countryside passing by outside the car.

"Did you remember your sunglasses?" Rafe asked quietly.

"They're in my chest pocket." Dodger said absently.

"What about your gloves?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"They're in the pocket of the little suitcase you gave me." Dodger said as he turned to face Rafe more fully.

"That's a carry-on bag. The airline will let you take a small case aboard with you. I just wanted to be sure that you had what you needed to protect yourself if we find ourselves in daylight at some point." Rafe said frankly.

"Thank you. I don't have a clue of what I'm going to need, so I appreciate you double checking." Dodger said quietly.

They rode in silence for a few minutes, then Dodger suddenly said, "I've got a question."

"I bet you're going to have a lot of them." Rafe said with a smile, "What do you want to know?"

"Well, it's about the blood." Dodger said slowly.

Rafe nodded.

"I guess my first question is kind of based in the whole vampire mythology. Do we need blood to live... or the blood substitute?" Dodger asked slowly.

"In the short term, no. In the long term, yes." Rafe said carefully.

Dodger thought for a moment, then said, "The blood gives us something that we can't get in regular food."

"Not in adequate amounts to sustain us." Rafe said with a nod.

"So I guess that leads to my next question. If we have blood, or your substitute, do we even need to eat food at all?" Dodger asked seriously.

"That's difficult to say." Rafe said thoughtfully. "We do gain nutrition and building materials from regular food. I think it's healthier for us to have a varied diet, but I can't say for certain that we absolutely **need** to eat food."

Dodger nodded, seeming satisfied with the answer.

"Besides, I enjoy a good meal. It makes me happy." Rafe finished with a smile.

Dodger saw the smile and grinned back at him.

"So what else have you got? I can see that something else is bothering you." Rafe said frankly.

"Well, I know it's going to sound silly, but I've never flown before and I'm kind of excited and nervous about that." Dodger said shyly.

"There's nothing silly about that at all. I'm a little bit in awe of it myself." Rafe said frankly.

"You are?" Dodger asked in wonder.

"Yes. Think about what travel was like when I was your age. To go someplace we had to travel at night and hope that we could find adequate shelter during the day. If it was someplace farther away, we usually had to be shipped as cargo to our destination." Rafe said frankly.

"Cargo?" Dodger asked hesitantly.

"In coffins." Rafe said timidly.

"You traveled in a coffin." Dodger confirmed.

"It was really the only way to get to someplace distant." Rafe said seriously. "I remember the first time I traveled that way. I was about 13 and I was traveling with my parents. We feasted before we got into our coffins, then we forced ourselves into torpor."

"What's that?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"It's like hibernation. You meditate really deep and it slows your body down so you can exist on very little blood for a long journey." Rafe said distantly.

Dodger nodded that he understood.

"So I was laying there, minding my own business, looking as dead as I could be. When someone opened up my coffin." Rafe said slowly. "Being in torpor, I didn't react immediately, it takes a minute or two to really wake up. So this guy, he was one of the ship's crew, had me pulled half-way out of my coffin and had my pants around my ankles before I knew what was happening. Let's just say that if I had slept one minute longer, you wouldn't have been the first man to have me back there."

"What did you do?" Dodger asked in wide eyed wonder.

"I did what my instincts told me to do." Rafe said quietly. "I bared my fangs and bit into his neck. I sucked and sucked as hard as I could until he was dead."

"Good." Dodger said quietly.

"It was the first time I had ever killed anyone." Rafe admitted shyly. "Up until then, my parents had always given me animal blood."

"So what did you do next?" Dodger asked curiously.

"I went to my dad's coffin and opened it." Rafe said distantly. "By the time his eyes were open, I was crying hysterically. I don't think I was ever so scared in my life."

"What did your dad do?" Dodger asked quietly.

"He took me into his arms and held me until I stopped crying." Rafe said with a smile. "Then, when I was settled down, he asked me what happened and I told him. He said he was going to deal with it and asked me if I wanted to help him."

Dodger smiled at the way Rafe's face lit up at the memory.

"He'd never really asked me to help him with anything before. So, of course, I went with him." Rafe said with a distant smile. "We tangled the crewman in the rigging with a rope wrapped around his neck and did our best to make it look accidental. Then we went back to our coffins and finished our journey."

"Did they ever find out that it wasn't an accident?" Dodger asked slowly, barely able to imagine how he would have reacted in a similar situation.

"Not that we ever heard." Rafe said quietly. "But I must have stayed awake for two days in that coffin, worrying if they were going to come after me at any moment."

"It sounds like it was tough." Dodger said honestly.

"You think that was tough? After I went through all of that, I stopped growing for almost a hundred years. Think about it. One hundred years as a thirteen year old." Rafe said, then shook his head in wonder.

"That doesn't sound like too much fun." Dodger admitted as he tried to restrain his chuckles.

"Yeah. Persia in the 14th century wasn't a lot of fun for a thirteen year old foreign boy who couldn't go out in the daylight." Rafe said frankly.

"How long did you stay there?" Dodger asked with a smile.

"Only about six years. My parents could tell that I was miserable, so they cut their trip short." Rafe said warmly. "Years later, after I was out on my own, they returned there several times. In fact, it's entirely possible that they're there now."

"Really?" Dodger asked with surprise.

"The last time I heard from them, they were in that general area." Rafe said thoughtfully. "They love ancient cultures."

"I guess that would make sense." Dodger said with a nod.

"For them, maybe. I don't like to dwell too much on the past." Rafe said frankly.

"I know. That's one of the things I love about you." Dodger said with a grin.

"As much as I would like to hear about some of the others, we're almost there." Rafe said regretfully.

"Then I'll tell you later." Dodger said with a smile.

* * * * *

Dodger followed Rafe into the office, feeling uncomfortable in the impersonal gray government building.

"Rafe, it's good to see you." A man said with cheer.

Dodger didn't know what he expected, but this man certainly wasn't it.

The man appeared to be about 40 years old, possibly older. The thing that immediately drew Dodger's attention was the man's huge mustache. It looked like it would be more appropriate on a walrus.

"Morgan, I'd like for you to meet Dodger." Rafe said warmly.

"It's a pleasure to meet you Dodger." the man said as he approached and offered his hand.

"Yes. It's nice to meet you, too." Dodger said shyly as he shook the offered hand.

Morgan looked at Dodger curiously, then cautiously said "You haven't been changed long, I'd wager."

"No. It's been less than a day, but he came through it without any problems at all." Rafe said proudly.

"Good for you." Morgan said with a grin, then said, "Come back here and let Claudia take your picture, then we can get everything else going."

Dodger followed along silently, feeling completely lost.

* * * * *

"Claudia, this is Dodger. Are you ready for him?" Morgan asked pleasantly.

"Yes. Everything is ready." She said efficiently, then turned to Dodger and said, "Stand over there with your toes on the tape and face me."

Dodger looked around and saw a strip of tape on the floor. He went to the proper place and faced Claudia.

She looked into the machine, then shook her head.

"Is there a problem?" Rafe asked with concern.

"It's his skin tone. I think I'm going to need to put some makeup on him." She said seriously, then began to absently mutter, "Foundation... some blush..."

Dodger's eyes went wide with surprise.

There was a flash of light that blinded him, then Claudia said, "Perfect."

Rafe and Dodger shared a questioning look, then Morgan explained, "Claudia is a professional at this. She needed for your photo to look like a typical ID picture."

"Everyone looks horrible or unprepared in their pictures. If I were to take a picture of you looking normal and relaxed, it might give someone cause to look at it more closely."

"She knows her business, trust her judgement." Morgan said with a nod.

"Dodger." Claudia said to gain his attention. As soon as he looked at her, there was another flash.

"That should be all I'll need to get started." Claudia said happily.

Dodger blinked his eyes, trying to get the glowing orbs to dissipate from his field of vision.

"While Claudia is processing your ID, I need for you to come in here and look at what I've prepared." Morgan said as he gestured back toward the main room.

Dodger hurried to Rafe's side and walked with him into the next room.

* * * * *

Have a seat and I'll tell you what I have for you." Morgan said happily as he took a seat behind his desk.

"Since Rafe mentioned that you've already received your High School Equivalency, I talked to a friend in the school administration and got a copy of your records, so that the rest of what I've created for you fits into what's already been established." Morgan said seriously. "Here we have a Certificate of Live Birth, a social security card, a full vaccination and immunization record, and Claudia is finishing your passport."

"Passport?" Dodger asked quietly.

"They can be a bitch to get in a hurry, and it never hurts to have one." Morgan said frankly.

Dodger looked at Rafe and found him nodding his agreement.

"Now, here's something that I thought might be good for you to have since you're planning to cross state lines." Morgan said as he slid a piece of paper to Dodger.

"Emancipation?" Dodger asked as he tried to make sense of the legal document.

"This just says that, in the eyes of the State of Ohio, you're seen as an adult. You can speak and act for yourself and don't need any parent or guardian's permission to do a damned thing." Morgan said happily.

"Don't you need to go before a judge to get one of these?" Dodger asked slowly.

"Yes. And if anyone asks, that's exactly what you did." Morgan said firmly.

Dodger slowly nodded that he understood.

"This is just one of those things that's necessary for us to interact on the brightside." Rafe said quietly.

"I understand that." Dodger said slowly. "It's just hard for me to get used to the idea that I'm going to have to lie all the time to be around people."

"It's a fact of shadeside life." Rafe said regretfully.

The look in Rafe's eyes caused him to lose his train of thought. It looked as though Rafe was regretting changing him. Probably feeling that he had taken something away from Dodger.

"I'll get used to it." Dodger said as he forced a smile. "It's just going to take time."

"The first fifty years or so are the worst. After that, you have trouble remembering it being any other way." Morgan said frankly.

"I've noticed that every generation seems to want the government to have just a little bit more information about them." Rafe said distantly. "I can't say that I'm very comfortable with things the way they are now. It used to be that a man could just pick up and go away and start a new life whenever he wanted. Now... I just don't think that's possible anymore."

"It's getting harder." Morgan said with resignation. "But, as the brightsiders develop newer and more ingenious ways to strip away our anonymity, we'll come up with bigger and better ways to stay ahead of them."

"It's good to know that you're on the job." Rafe said with a smile.

"Speaking of which, do you have any initial thoughts about your immunity case? I have to confess that I don't know what you're planning." Morgan asked seriously.

"First thoughts... this could be a cure." Rafe said frankly.

"Cure!? There's nothing wrong with me and if you or anyone tries to cure me you'll be wishing for death before I'm through with you." Morgan said in a threatening tone.

"A cure for those who are suffering." Rafe said gently. "A cure for those who were changed against their will. A cure for those who lost their souls. This could be a humane way to deal with those monsters that we're forced to exterminate."

"Rafe, mark my words, I'm not the only one who's going to feel this way about what you're trying to do. You'd better watch your back." Morgan said seriously.

"I'll be watching his back." Dodger said firmly.

Morgan grinned at Dodger, then looked at Rafe and said, "When I talked to that ranch owner, he seemed like he didn't know if he was doing the right thing by inviting you. You say one wrong thing and he could turn on you."

"I'll keep that in mind." Rafe said somberly.

"But..." Morgan said, then let out a long breath before continuing, "...science is always coming up with things that we don't expect. I just wish I knew if you were going to find the salvation of our people, or the destruction."

"All I can do is ask you to trust my judgement and know that if it turns out to be too dangerous, I'll deal with it." Rafe said honestly.

"I've known you for a long time Rafe, I know I can trust you." Morgan said as he looked at Rafe warmly, then in a slightly cooler voice he said, "But these people where you're going, they don't know you. They never heard of you until they needed a doctor who knew about immunity and they contacted me asking if I knew anyone."

"I understand." Rafe said slowly.

"Then that's all I'm saying. I gave my warning, you listened, it's done." Morgan said simply.

Rafe nodded but didn't say anything.

Chapter 9

"Here you go, Dodger. I suppose you'll want to look these over." Morgan said as he pushed a file folder across the desk to Dodger.

As Dodger opened the folder, Morgan continued, "Remember to come back to me when you need to update those. Time slides past you when you're not paying attention. If you're not careful, one day you may find yourself trying to explain to a police officer why you look 16 and your ID says that you're 35."

"I'll remember." Dodger said quietly, as he looked over the documents, trying to be sure that he was familiar with all of them.

"So is there anything he needs to know about all of this?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"No. Everything there is as close to the truth as possible. If Dodger is honest about his history, this documentation should prove that everything is as it should be." Morgan said seriously.

"Thank you, Morgan. I think that will work best." Rafe said gratefully.

"I'm sorry that took so long." Claudia said as she rushed into the room. "Here you go, Dodger. Take a look and see what you think."

Dodger held the photo ID and passport out so Rafe could look at them with him.

"Perfect." Rafe said happily, then noticed that Dodger had an unusual expression.

"Is something wrong?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"No." Dodger said as he looked at Rafe and revealed that he was fighting back the beginnings of tears.

"I just saw this with my name on it and your address and I..." Dodger trailed off shyly, then quietly added, "It just makes me happy."

Rafe smiled warmly at Dodger, then turned to Morgan and asked, "Is that everything?"

"Yes. Just be sure to call in with updates. I want to know how things are going with your work." Morgan said seriously.

Rafe chuckled, then said, "I doubt that this rancher is going to have anywhere near the lab equipment that I'm going to need. So expect to be hearing from me as soon as I've taken inventory." Rafe said frankly.

"I'll be standing by." Morgan said with a nod.

"Hopefully, the next time I see you we'll have good cause to celebrate." Rafe said sincerely as he stood.

"I'll settle for not having a reason to grieve." Morgan said frankly.

"I'll do what I can." Rafe said seriously, then broke into a grin and added, "Dodger will help."

"Then I won't worry." Morgan said with a fond smile at Dodger.

* * * * *

"I was hoping we could go to the club for a while, but I don't think we have time. We should probably go to the airport." Rafe said as they walked out to the car.

"What should I do with these?" Dodger asked as he indicated the folder of documents.

"Put those in your carry-on bag. Chances are that you won't need them, but it's better to be safe." Rafe said casually, then opened Dodger's car door.

"I feel like I'm never going to get used to all of this." Dodger said quietly.

"It's been less than a day. Just give it time." Rafe said before getting into the car.

* * * * *

"That light hurts." Dodger said as he squinted at the brightness of the light inside the airport.

"I know, you'll just need to put up with it long enough for us to get our bags checked in." Rafe said uncomfortably. "Remember to keep your carry-on with you. They'll be putting the rest of our luggage in the belly of the plane."

"I'm sorry I snapped at you in the department store at Christmas. I didn't have any idea that it could be this bad." Dodger said as he fought the urge to shield his eyes.

"You had no way of knowing." Rafe said gently, then gestured toward the check-in desk.

"Good evening, how can I help you?" A pleasant young woman asked from behind the counter.

"I should have two pre-paid tickets waiting for Dr. Raphael Killian." Rafe said professionally as he held out his ID.

After looking around her desk, the woman smiled and said, "Yes, Dr. Killian. Everything is here and seems to be in order."

Rafe accepted the tickets from the woman, then handed one to Dodger.

She motioned to someone nearby and a moment later he was taking their luggage away.

"We'll be in the captain's club when our flight is ready." Rafe said quietly, trying to keep the strain out of his voice.

"We'll contact you there when your flight is ready to board. I hope you have an enjoyable flight." She said cheerfully.

"Thank you." Rafe said, then motioned for Dodger to follow.

Dodger picked up his carry-on bag and quickly followed.

"I hope it's darker in the club." Dodger said in a pained voice.

"Yes, but there's another obstacle to overcome before we'll be able to relax.

Dodger glanced at Rafe, but didn't ask.

* * * * *

"I can't breathe." Dodger gasped as they walked into the dimly lit, loud, smoke filled room.

"I know." Rafe said as he quickly led the way to the bar.

Dodger followed along as best he could with his eyes watering and feeling like he was suffocating.

Rafe waited for a moment for the bartender to acknowledge him, then said, "I'm supposed to be meeting Mr. Tenebrous."

"Yes sir, you're expected. Right this way." The bartender said quickly as he gestured toward the end of the bar.

Dodger followed Rafe, hoping that wherever they were going would be someplace that he could breathe.

* * * * *

"I'll return in a moment. I hope you enjoy your evening." The bartender said before withdrawing from the small lounge.

Dodger looked around and smiled. It was quiet. The air was clean. The lights were low and the blinds had been opened, giving a beautiful view of the runway.

"Who is Mr. Tenebrous?" Dodger asked as he followed Rafe to a table.

"That's sort of a code name that we use to identify ourselves as shadesiders." Rafe said as he sat down.

"So the bartender knows that we're shadesiders?" Dodger asked carefully.

"Yes. He may have a friend or family member that's a shadesider. People who already know about us and can be trusted are sometimes enlisted to work in positions where they can help us." Rafe said as he relaxed.

The bartender walked into the room with two glasses of juice, then asked, "Would you like a menu?"

"Yes. Thank you." Rafe said with a smile.

The bartender placed an open menu before each man, then said, "I'll return shortly to take your orders."

Rafe nodded, then looked at his menu carefully.

After looking over the menu selections, Dodger quietly asked, "What are you going to have?"

"I don't know. I think I'll probably have something fairly substantial since it's going to be a long flight. Overnight flights typically don't offer a dinner service." Rafe said thoughtfully.

Dodger nodded, then looked at the menu again.

"What are you thinking of having?" Rafe asked casually.

"This fried chicken dinner looks good to me." Dodger said slowly.

Rafe looked at his menu again, then said, "You know, that does look good."

The door to the lounge opened and the bartender walked in with two other people.

"I'll return in a moment, I hope you'll enjoy your evening." the bartender said to the young looking couple, then walked to Rafe and Dodger's table and asked, "Are you ready to order?"

"I'll have the fried chicken dinner." Rafe said, then flashed a smile at Dodger.

"Me too." Dodger said, then closed his menu and handed it to the bartender.

"I'll have your salads in just a moment." the bartender said pleasantly before withdrawing.

"Are you two headed to LA?" the young man asked from the next table.

"Albuquerque." Rafe answered casually.

"Why in god's name would you want to go there?" the young man asked with a chuckle.

"Business." Rafe said with a shrug.

"I should have known. There's no other reason to go to that barren wasteland." the man said frankly, then added, "I'm Toby and this is Alice."

"I'm Rafe and this is Dodger." Rafe said with a friendly smile.

Toby looked at Dodger curiously, then asked, "Just changed, huh?"

"Yesterday." Rafe said with a nod.

"Welcome to the shadeside, Dodger." Toby said with a cheerful smile.

"Thanks." Dodger said timidly.

Before the conversation could continue, the bartender returned with drinks for Toby and Alice and salads for Rafe and Dodger.

"How does everyone know that I've just changed?" Dodger asked quietly.

"Your scent." Rafe said frankly.

"Does that mean that I smell funny?" Dodger asked anxiously.

Rafe chuckled as he shook his head, "No Dodger, it's just that brightsiders have a distinct scent. I think it has something to do with the higher body temperature. It's going to take a few days for that to fade from you."

Dodger slowly nodded that he understood.

"You don't smell funny." Rafe said quietly.

Dodger smiled at the assurance.

* * * * *

Their dinner was surprisingly good and Dodger vowed that when they finally got back home, he was going to try making some fried chicken that was at least as good.

After their meal, they enjoyed some polite conversation with Toby. And, at one point, Alice even spoke.

"Dr. Killian?" The bartender asked quietly.

"Yes." Rafe responded.

"Your flight is ready to board." the bartender said gently.

"Thank you." Rafe said with a smile.

The bartender nodded, then hurried out of the room.

Rafe took out his wallet and placed two $20 bills on the table.

"The meal cost $40?" Dodger asked with surprise.

"No. I'll be billed for the meal. This is a tip for the bartender. He took good care of us." Rafe said seriously.

Dodger thought for a moment, then nodded his agreement.

"You headed out?" Toby asked cheerfully.

"Yes. Our flight is boarding." Rafe said with a friendly smile to the outgoing young man.

"Ours too. I think we're on the same flight." Toby said cheerfully.

"It must land in Albuquerque, then continue on to Los Angeles." Rafe said speculatively.

"If you don't mind the company, we'll walk down with you." Toby said with a smile.

"Sounds good. Maybe we can work together to get everyone through the fog." Rafe said seriously.

"I used to smoke before. I just wish I could show those smokers the crap I hacked out of my lungs after the change. Maybe they'd think twice about what they're doing to themselves." Toby said as they started walking as a group.

"I doubt it." Rafe said frankly.

Dodger and Alice fell into step, side-by-side, as Rafe and Toby continued to talk.

* * * * *

When the group reached the departure gate, there were about two hundred people waiting to board the plane.

"Dr. Killian? Mr. Dubois?" A flight attendant asked as they approached.

"Yes. That's right." Toby answered for all of them.

"If you'll follow me, we're ready to begin boarding." The flight attendant said, then ushered them past the waiting passengers.

Dodger took in a deliberate deep breath, then nearly gagged at the stench of so many people gathered in such a small area.

Rafe glanced at Dodger with a knowing smile, but didn't comment.

* * * * *

Once they were seated, Dodger leaned over and whispered to ask, "Why did we get to go before everyone else?"

"Because we're first class passengers. We pay the most, so we get to sit down and relax until boarding is complete." Rafe said pleasantly.

"Oh, I thought somehow, because we're... um, you know, that they were treating us different." Dodger said carefully.

"No. First class ticket, first class treatment. It's that simple." Rafe said with a smile.

Dodger nodded, then looked up when a stewardess approached with four glasses of juice.

"Something to refresh you before we take off?" She asked pleasantly as she offered the drinks.

"Yes. Thank you." Rafe said with a smile as he took a glass.

"Thanks." Dodger said as he also accepted a drink.

"I can't get enough of this stuff." Toby said with a chuckle.

"If any of you need anything, my name is Audra, and I'll be taking care of you this evening." the stewardess said pleasantly.

"You're doing a great job of it so far, Audra." Toby said happily.

"Would anyone like some headphones?" Audra asked curiously.

"Yeah. That sounds good." Toby said immediately.

"Us too." Rafe said casually.

Audra handed out the headphones, then left the cabin.

"What do you do with these?" Dodger asked curiously.

"You plug them into the arm of the seat so you can listen to music while we're in flight." Rafe said as he pointed to the radio controls.

"Oh. That sounds like fun." Dodger said with a smile.

There was a sound of movement behind them as four more first class passengers took their places in the forward cabin.

"I feel like we're being herded like cattle." a portly man grumbled as he took his seat.

"Can I get you a drink to relax you before we take off?" a stewardess asked cheerfully as soon as he was seated.

"Scotch, neat." The man said tersely.

Dodger noticed Rafe flinch at the sound of a lighter lighting. A moment later, he could smell the unmistakable smell of a cigar.

"I'll take care of it." Rafe said under his breath, then turned to look at the piggish man, puffing on his cigar.

Rafe didn't say a word or move a muscle, he just seemed to be staring at the man.

Finally Rafe moved to face forward and smiled to himself.

Dodger looked back in time to see the portly gentleman put out his cigar.

"Thank you." the man said as he accepted his drink and sounded sincerely grateful.

"Thanks." Toby said from his seat across the aisle from Rafe.

"Glad to do it." Rafe said with a grin.

* * * * *

Although the boarding process seemed to take quite a while, the captain did finally announce that they were ready for take-off.

Audra walked through the first class cabin and made sure everyone was belted in.

"Just relax." Rafe said gently. He could almost feel Dodger's nervousness vibrating out from him.

"I'm trying." Dodger whispered.

"Here." Rafe said as he offered his hand.

Dodger took the hand and held it firmly.

"I can 'help' you, if you want." Rafe said quietly.

At Dodger's uncomprehending stare, Rafe made a casual gesture with his head to indicate the rotund gentleman in the row behind them.

"No. But thanks." Dodger said nervously.

Just then, the sound of the engines increased and Dodger grabbed onto Rafe's hand tightly.

"It lasts for less than a minute. Just hang on and you'll be fine." Rafe said gently.

"I'm okay." Dodger said past gritted teeth as he could feel the plane leaving the ground.

Rafe looked down at Dodger's white knuckled grip on his hand and was grateful that he healed quickly.

* * * * *

Once the flight had leveled off, Dodger seemed to relax completely.

After a few minutes of conversation, both men put on their headphones so they could listen to some music to pass the time.

Rafe heard an unusual droning sound and took off his headphones to investigate.

It took a moment for the sound to repeat, but when it did, Rafe had to fight to keep from breaking into laughter.

"Dodger." He said quietly as he shook Dodger's arm.

After a moment to get the headphones off, Dodger looked at Rafe curiously.

"While you're wearing headphones, you can't hear yourself, but everyone else can hear you." Rafe said quietly.

"What?" Dodger asked in confusion.

"You were humming along with the music." Rafe explained quietly.

"Oh." Dodger said with sudden comprehension, then quietly added, "Sorry."

"I think everyone has done it at one time or another." Rafe said with a gentle smile.

Dodger nodded, then put his headphones back on.

* * * * *

A while later, Rafe felt a hand on his arm and looked at Dodger with question.

"I was just thinking..." Dodger trailed off, obviously rethinking what he was going to say.

"Thinking about what?" Rafe asked gently, wanting to put Dodger at ease so he would feel free to continue.

"I was thinking about Ernie and Blake and Manna... you know?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"What about them?" Rafe asked curiously.

"They're married, the three of them. And I was thinking that if they can do that..." Dodger trailed off again.

Rafe nodded, encouraging Dodger to continue.

"I was just wondering, can we, I mean, is it somehow possible for **us** to get married?" Dodger asked nervously.

"Would you like to be?" Rafe asked with a smile.

After a moment of thought, Dodger quietly admitted, "Yeah. I would."

"Then we are." Rafe said simply. "The moment you asked me to commit to you and I accepted, we became husbands in the eyes of the shadeside community."

"But isn't there a ceremony or something we should do?" Dodger asked slowly.

"People sometimes choose to have a ceremony to announce their wedding, so they can share it with all of their friends." Rafe said seriously.

"Since we're leaving all our friends back in Ohio, I guess we can't do that." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"Dodger, we're married. That's the important part. But if you want a ceremony, just let me know when you're ready and we'll have one. I would be honored to publicly declare my love for you." Rafe said with a loving smile.

"I think I"d like that too." Dodger said as he looked into Rafe's eyes.

Rafe leaned in and gave Dodger a quick kiss, then put his headphones back on.

Dodger smiled at the incredibly sweet action as he went back to listening to music.

* * * * *

"Excuse me, Dr. Killian." Audra asked quietly.

"Yes?" Rafe responded as he took off his headphones.

"Are you a medical doctor?" Audra asked cautiously.

"Yes, I am, is there a problem?" Rafe asked with concern.

"A passenger just passed out in the aisle and we were wondering if you'd have a look at him." Audra asked hopefully.

"Of course." Rafe said, then took his carry-on bag out of the overhead compartment. "Be just a moment."

"What's wrong?" Dodger asked as he took off his headphones.

"A sick passenger. I'm going to see if I can help him." Rafe said as he extracted a smaller black case from the bottom of his carry-on bag.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Not right now, but I'll let you know." Rafe said with a quick smile at Dodger, then looked at Audra, indicating that he was ready to go.

* * * * *

"We've been told not to move someone who fell, in case they hurt their neck or back." Audra explained as they approached the man lying in the aisle.

"Yes. That's probably best." Rafe said as he moved awkwardly over the young man and began to assess his overall condition.

"Do you think you could clear this seat so I'll have some room to work?" Rafe asked Audra hopefully.

Audra nodded, then indicated for another stewardess to come to her.

The young man began to stir. After a moment, he blinked his eyes, then tried to sit up.

"Hold on. You fell, I need to see if you've hurt yourself before you get up and move around." Rafe said gently, then asked, "What's your name?"

"Little Joe." The young man said slowly, then added, "That's what my family calls me."

"I hope that means that there's also a Big Joe." Rafe said as he noticed the clamminess of Little Joe's skin.

"Yeah. My dad... I think I'm going to be sick." The young man said past heavy breathing.

"Do you have any pain in your back or neck?" Rafe asked firmly as he gently probed.

"No. But I'm gonna throw up." Little Joe said insistently.

"Come with me." Rafe said as he helped the young man to stand.

Audra and the other stewardesses helped to clear the aisle as Rafe led the young man to the forward lavatory.

"Leave the door open. You don't look good and I don't want to have to break it down if you pass out." Rafe said seriously.

Little Joe barely stepped into the lavatory, when his stomach let loose.

The stewardesses backed up and grimaced at the sound.

"How are you doing?" Rafe asked gently as he patted Little Joe's back.

"Better." He said past heavy breathing.

"Wash your face, then I want to have a look at you." Rafe said seriously.

Little Joe paused for a moment, apparently not sure if he was done vomiting, then moved to wash his face.

* * * * *

"Come with me." Rafe said as he led Little Joe into the first class cabin.

"Have a seat, I need to have a look at you." Rafe said seriously then turned to Audra and quietly said, "It was too crowded back there for me to work."

Little Joe looked around the first class cabin briefly, then sat down beside Dodger.

"This is Little Joe, he's not feeling well." Rafe said as he got out his stethoscope.

"Hi Little Joe, I'm Dodger."

"Hi." Little Joe said, then turned his attention to Rafe who was holding a stethoscope to his chest.

"Breathe in for me." Rafe said quietly.

Little Joe took in a deep breath, then released it slowly.

"Good." Rafe said gently, then asked, "Will you tell me how you're feeling?"

"Bad. I was okay when I got on the plane, but all of a sudden my eyes started going weird and then I started feeling sick to my stomach." Little Joe said seriously.

"Have you been around anyone who has had the flu recently?" Rafe asked cautiously as he took a small flashlight out of his case.

"No. I've been visiting my grandparents in Eastern Ohio for the past two weeks. They're both fine." Little Joe said, and started blinking his eyes, like he was trying to clear his vision.

"Are you having trouble seeing?" Rafe asked curiously.

"Yeah. I see two of you. You're double." Little Joe said as his breathing started becoming more labored.

"Rafe, this kinda looks like what my brother Danny had when I was a kid." Dodger said carefully.

"What was that?" Rafe asked as he shined his flashlight on one of Little Joe's pupils and moved it away quickly.

"Um, I don't remember what it was called, but it was because he got into the cellar and ate a few jars of ma's home canned pears. The doc said that the seal must've gone bad." Dodger said carefully.

"Was it botulism?" Rafe asked with surprise.

"Yeah. I think that's what they called it." Dodger said with a nod.

Rafe paused for a moment, then started moving quickly.

"Little Joe, can you tell me what you had for dinner today?" Rafe asked as he dug through his case.

"Some kind of beef and mushroom casserole that my grandma made." Little Joe said with confusion and seemed to be having more difficulty breathing.

"Audra." Rafe barked, not looking away from Little Joe.

"Yes." She said as she hurried to his side.

"I need you to write something down." Rafe said absently.

Audra took out a small notepad and a pen from her pocket.

"Little Joe, where do your grandparents live and what are their names?" Rafe asked gently.

"Um. Cadiz, Ohio and their names are John and Hester Luyster." Little Joe said and seemed to be fighting to breathe.

"Little Joe, this is going to be uncomfortable for a minute, but it's going to make it easier for you to breathe." Rafe said, then said to Dodger, "Help me hold him so he doesn't fight me."

Dodger stood from his seat and leaned in to hold Little Joe's arms down.

Rafe opened a package then started forcing a long plastic tube down Little Joe's throat.

Little Joe was gagging and trying to turn his head.

"That's got it." Rafe finally said with relief. "One more minute and it wouldn't have gone. His throat was closing up."

"What do you want me to do with this?" Audra asked, still holding the notebook.

"We're going to need to call to check on his grandparents and to make sure that there's an ambulance waiting when we land." Rafe said as he stood.

"What can I do?" Dodger asked quickly.

"Stay with Little Joe and try to keep him calm. Send someone to get me if he's having any problems." Rafe said seriously, then started walking toward the front of the plane.

* * * * *

"Try not to worry, Little Joe. Rafe is a good doctor. In fact, he's so good that he's making a house call all the way from Ohio to New Mexico." Dodger said with a grin.

Little Joe looked at Dodger with wide, terrified eyes.

Dodger took Little Joe's hand and held it firmly.

Little Joe's frightened look became curious as he looked down at their joined hands.

"You know what they say, 'cold hands, warm heart'." Dodger said with a smile.

Little Joe blinked, then slowly nodded.

"Rafe is going to figure this out. I mean, think about what he just did. He must have known what was about to happen, so he asked you about the things he needed to know from you before he stuck the tube in your throat. So that means that he knows that you're going to be fine or he wouldn't have left your side." Dodger said gently.

Little Joe seemed to be considering the words for a moment, then reluctantly nodded.

Dodger smiled, then said, "So, you've got a 'great' doctor looking out for you, you're able to breathe, you're not alone. I guess if you're going to be sick, this isn't the worst situation to be in."

The look in Little Joe's eyes showed that he wasn't quite convinced of that.

Dodger chuckled, then said, "Okay. Maybe this is pretty close. But you're going to get through it."

Little Joe's eyes widened as he stared at Dodger in awe.

"Please believe me. You're going to be fine." Dodger said and could almost hear his own words echoing back to him.

"You're glowing." Toby whispered in a tone of warning.

Dodger puzzled over the words, then realized what Toby meant.

Dodger reigned in his emotions, then smiled shyly as he said, "Sorry, I'm new at this."

Little Joe stared at Dodger for a moment longer, then seemed to calm down.

"Good. I think that if you can just relax, there's not going to be anything to worry about." Dodger said with a smile.

* * * * *

"How's he doing?" Rafe asked as he hurried back to Little Joe's side.

"He's calmed down." Dodger said quietly.

"Little Joe, listen to me." Rafe said seriously.

"I called the ground and had someone call your grandparents. They're both feeling sick, but an ambulance has been called and they're both going to be fine." Rafe said firmly.

Little Joe slowly nodded that he understood.

"Until we can get a lab test back, we can't confirm that this is botulism, but the symptomology and what you've told me all seem to point that way." Rafe said seriously. "Even if I were seeing you in the hospital right now, there wouldn't be much more that I could do for you until the lab test came back."

"So an ambulance and a doctor are going to be waiting on us when we arrive in Albuquerque. The moment that the lab report from your grandparents comes back, they'll begin administering treatment and you'll be just fine." Rafe said gently.

"I told you." Dodger said as he squeezed Little Joe's hand encouragingly.

Little Joe looked at Dodger, then gave a squeeze in return.

Chapter 10

As Dodger walked off the plane, he saw a man holding up a handmade cardboard sign that said 'Killian'.

The man looked like he might have just walked out of a cigarette advertisement. You couldn't find a more classic looking cowboy figure outside of Hollywood.

"Dr. Killian?" the man asked curiously when Dodger approached.

Dodger puzzled over the man's assumption when he realized that he was wearing his tailored three-piece suit.

"No. My name is Dodger, but I'm travelling with him. Dr. Killian had to take care of a medical emergency on the plane. He's with the ambulance, right now." Dodger said seriously, trying to keep a pleasant tone in his voice. From the casual appearance of the man before him, Dodger became concerned that the man would think that he was pompous or 'uppity'.

"I'm Bruce. Sam sent me out here to pick up Dr. Killian." the man said slowly, and seemed to be suspicious.

"He told me to meet him in the baggage claim, so we can go there if you like." Dodger said simply.

"Yeah. Um, are you... one of us?" Bruce asked cautiously.

Dodger puzzled over the question for a moment, then said, "Yes. I just changed yesterday. Rafe said that it'll be a few days before I smell right."

Bruce hesitantly nodded, then motioned for Dodger to follow him.

* * * * *

"How's he doing?" Dodger asked quickly as Rafe approached.

"They got the lab results just as we landed and confirmed botulism, so Little Joe and his grandparents are all going to be fine." Rafe said happily.

"It's a good thing that there was a doctor on board to help him." Dodger said with a smile.

"It's an even better thing that there was a hoopie on board who recognized the symptoms of botulism." Rafe said seriously. "I specialize in infectious diseases, so my first impulse was to try and figure out what type of flu he was suffering from. I believe that you may have saved that boy's life... and his grandparents' lives too."

Dodger looked at Rafe with surprise at the statement.

"I'm Bruce. I'm going to be taking you to the ranch." Bruce said seriously.

"It's nice to meet you, Bruce. I'm Dr. Raphael Killian, but you're welcomed to call me Rafe." He said, as he extended his hand to shake.

"Let's get out of here. These lights are giving me a headache." Bruce said firmly.

Rafe slowly withdrew his hand, then glanced at Dodger and asked, "Do we have everything?"

Dodger gestured to the loaded cart of luggage and said, "Yeah. It's all here."

"Then we'd better go. Right this way." Bruce said and gestured toward the exit.

* * * * *

"What can you tell me about my patient?" Rafe asked, as Bruce pulled out of the airport.

"Not much, but I can fill you in on how we found him." Bruce said seriously.

Dodger tried to get comfortable sitting on the bench seat of the pickup truck between Rafe and Bruce.

"Anything you can tell me might be of help." Rafe said professionally.

"Let's see... about three or four days ago, we noticed that someone was feeding on some of our cattle." Bruce said distantly.

"It took a while, but we were finally able to pick up their trail. Out toward the edge of our land, we came across two cows that had been completely drained. From the look of the damage, we figured that six or eight of the critters got to 'em." Bruce said slowly. "We went back and got all the farm hands together, then we followed the trail to a farmhouse that was about... oh, eighteen or so miles from the ranch."

Rafe nodded as Dodger noticed the scenery outside. It was absolutely barren. Truly a wasteland.

"When we got to the house, it was filled with vampires. It looked like they stormed the place. All the men were killed, four of them... drained dry." Bruce said quietly, then added more darkly, "The women had been turned."

Rafe nodded that he understood.

"Well, we did what we had to do. We fought the critters and put 'em down as mercifully as we could. But when we got upstairs, we found the boy." Bruce said distantly.

"They'd fed on him... a lot." Bruce said quietly, then added in a grave tone. "And they raped him... a lot."

"They must have been trying to turn him." Rafe said speculatively.

"Yeah. That's what we figure."

"Why?" Dodger asked curiously, then added, "If they killed the men, why would they want to turn the boy?"

"For the same reason, they turned the women. They must have wanted the boy for a steady supply of sex." Rafe said as he looked Dodger in the eyes.

Dodger looked at Rafe with horror.

"Dodger, they're vampires. All they care about is satisfying their own hungers and lusts. They have no compassion for others." Rafe said gently. "They're like animals, in that they'll kill to feed themselves, but they're like humans because they'll kill just for the sport or the thrill of it."

"Yeah." Bruce added darkly, then continued, "Since the boy was still alive, we tied him up and took him with us. We figured that he was probably going to change, and there was always a chance that he'd change the good way. So we had to wait and see which way he went."

Rafe nodded that he understood.

"But the little guy never changed." Bruce said quietly. "Sam, he owns the ranch, he knows some about doctoring and the like, so he patched the boy up, as best he could, then he called a few people trying to figure out what we should do."

"And someone he talked to got in touch with Morgan." Rafe added with a nod.

"I guess so. That's about all I know. The kid's still alive. Sam is keeping him in the basement of the farmhouse where he'll be safe." Bruce said frankly.

"Safe from what?" Dodger asked, curiously.

"The kid's not changed. Everyone on the ranch can smell it." Bruce said carefully. "I ain't sayin that someone would do that, but... It's just best for everyone if no one has an opportunity to give in to that particular temptation."

* * * * *

They traveled in silence for a while.

Dodger noticed the sun beginning to rise behind them, but before it could even become the least bit uncomfortable, Bruce pulled a pair of little curtains on the back window closed, to shade them.

The terrain seemed to get more hilly and rugged, but no more inviting. Dodger had the sensation that they were constantly driving uphill and farther away from anything that could possibly be deemed civilization.

Dodger felt his ears pop multiple times as they continued to go up and up the seemingly endless mountain roads. He couldn't help but compare the bleak landscape to the lush verdant green that surrounded his home with Rafe. He couldn't imagine how anything could live in such an inhospitable environment.

He found that the gray desolation of their surroundings was dragging his spirits down. He couldn't even imagine anyone feeling anything but despair in such a wretched place.

* * * * *

"Pull your shade." Bruce said firmly.

Rafe looked at him with confusion, then above the window beside him.

Just as Rafe was pulling the square of canvas down, Bruce turned right.

"This is the last town where we can get gas." Bruce said, as he pulled the truck to a stop.

Dodger looked around and noticed that the gas pumps were shielded from the sun by the gas station.

"If you two need to stretch your legs or anything, now would be the time. We're about to start the long part of the trip." Bruce said before getting out of the truck.

"How are you feeling?" Rafe asked Dodger with concern.

"I hate this place." Dodger said frankly.

Rafe slowly nodded, not even attempting to defend it.

"How could anyone choose to live in a place as desolate and just plain horrible as this?" Dodger asked quietly.

"A lot of them didn't have a choice, they were driven here. The rest... they're probably like the people at the ranch, just wanting to go someplace where they'll be left alone." Rafe said honestly.

"Things must have been pretty bad for them to come all the way out here." Dodger said frankly.

"Try thinking about how it was for you, at your parents' house." Rafe said quietly. "Would you have come to a place like this if you knew that you'd be free?"

Dodger thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I suppose I would have, given the chance."

"Just try to keep in mind that we won't be staying." Rafe said seriously.

Dodger chuckled and said, "Trust me, I'll be telling myself that every minute of every day that we're here."

Rafe smiled at the answer.

* * * * *

The journey continued in silence as they seemed to be going higher and higher into the mountains. Every time they turned off a road, it seemed that it was to get onto an even smaller, rougher road. Dodger had thought that when they pulled onto the gravel road that it had to be near the end of their journey, but the gravel road seemed to go on forever.

When he was finally used to the endless crunch of the gravel under their tires, Bruce did the unthinkable and turned off the gravel road.

The dirt road they had turned onto was partly overgrown with scraggly weeds and was, in fact, hardly better than driving across the open field would have been. Deep ruts had been carved into what had once been mud, causing the undercarriage of the truck to drag the ground when the ruts became too deep.

Bruce slowed the truck, then carefully drove down a steep embankment into what looked like a dry riverbed.

"If it rains, we can't get out until this goes down." Bruce commented absently.

The truck crossed the riverbed easily enough, but seemed to be having to work to get them up the steep incline on the other side.

"The ranch is just up ahead." Bruce said, as he drove down a dirt path that was nothing more than two tire tracks carved through the straw-like weeds.

As he crested the next hill, the main gate of the ranch came into view.

Standing out there in what seemed to literally be the middle of nowhere, was a large, ornate wrought iron gate.

"Welcome to Rancho de la Noche." Bruce said with a bit of pride in his voice.

"Ranch of the night?" Rafe asked with a grin.

"Yeah. Sounds spooky, huh?" Bruce asked with a chuckle.

"I like it." Dodger said honestly.

"It's been home to me for many a year." Bruce said wistfully as he drove the truck through the opened gate and down a path to the large farmhouse.

"Hang on. You're going to get a few seconds of sun, before I park." Bruce warned.

"Put your head down." Rafe whispered, then pulled Dodger's face against his shoulder and covered the back of Dodger's head with his hand.

As Bruce pulled the truck around, the sun shone in through the front window and directly on them.

Dodger felt the exposed skin of his ear and neck ignite with a fire that felt like he had been doused with hot grease, but clenched his jaw tight and refused to cry out.

"It's safe, now." Bruce said as he brought the truck to a stop under a crude lean-to that served as a carport.

As Rafe slowly released Dodger, he quietly asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I think so." Dodger said, forcing himself not to acknowledge the searing pain on his ear and neck.

Then Dodger noticed Rafe's bright pink hand and asked, "How about you?"

"I'll be fine." Rafe said with a loving smile.

Rafe fought the urge to snatch his hand away when Dodger carefully took it. He watched with caution as Dodger lifted the bright pink hand to his lips and gave only the slightest whisper of a kiss to each knuckle.

"Do y'all need some help with your bags?" Bruce asked as he got out of the truck.

Rafe smiled lovingly at Dodger for a moment, then responded, "If you wanted to grab some, I wouldn't try to stop you."

"Right." Bruce said, and almost betrayed a smile.

* * * * *

"Mavis, this is Dr. Killian, and Dodger." Bruce said, as he led the way into the kitchen and sat some luggage just inside the door.

"Please call me Rafe. It's a pleasure to meet you, Mavis." Rafe said formally.

"Yeah. Well, Rafe, just so you know, no one told me there was gonna be two of you. There's only the one guest room." Mavis said seriously, as she worked, cutting peeled potatoes into chunks and dropping them into a large pot of water on the stove. "But I'm sure the boys can make room for one more down in the bunkhouse if need be."

"One room will be perfectly fine for us." Rafe said with a smile.

Mavis looked from Rafe to Dodger, then said, "Well, good, I guess Sam ain't gonna have to worry about you trying to steal me away from him."

"No, I don't think that will be a problem." Rafe said gently.

"But I may need to keep an eye on you around my Sammy." Mavis said playfully.

"You don't have to worry about me. Dodger will see that I behave." Rafe said with a chuckle.

"I bet that's a full-time job." Mavis said with a wink at Dodger, then as she finished chunking up the last peeled potato, she said, "Come on. Your room's up this way."

* * * * *

"I know it probably ain't what you're used to, but it should do the trick." Mavis said as she led them into the bedroom.

Dodger looked around the room and was impressed. No, it wasn't anywhere near as nice as either his or Rafe's room, back in Ohio. But it was a decent size, clean, and had a sort of warm and homey quality to it.

"This will be just fine." Rafe said assuringly.

"Yeah. If you saw the place where I grew up, you'd think this was a palace." Dodger said with a grin.

"I just need to fill you in on a few things that you'll need to know before I leave you on your own." Mavis said seriously. "We run short on water around here, so keep that in mind every time you shower and every time you flush. Each drop you use now may be one that you'll wish you had later."

"We'll be careful." Rafe said quietly.

"Also, the only water fit for drinking is the well water in the kitchen. Don't try to drink from the hydrant in the bathroom, or you'll probably be doubled up with cramps before you know what hit you." Mavis said as she looked Rafe in the eyes.

"I'll keep that in mind." Rafe said, matching her gaze.

"Sam's already said that he's keepin the generator runnin while you're here, so you don't have to worry about the electric." Mavis said informatively.

"Please thank him for me. I'm sure that will make my work a lot easier." Rafe said quietly.

"That's it, then. Welcome to the ranch." Mavis said cheerfully, then turned to leave.

"Thank you." Rafe said quickly.

Mavis waved it off absently as she walked down the hallway.

* * * * *

"I know you have to go check on your patient. I'll unpack for us." Dodger said quietly. "I also want to get changed into some regular clothes, I feel really out of place."

"Come here." Rafe said as he opened his arms.

"I love you." Dodger whispered as he fell into the embrace. "I hate this place, but I love you."

"Thank you for coming with me, Dodger. This would have been as miserable as 14th century Persia, if you weren't here with me." Rafe said quietly.

Dodger chuckled, then pulled Rafe into a firm kiss.

Just as the kiss was getting intense, Dodger forced himself to pull away.

"You have a patient who needs you. That was just a taste of what's waiting for you tonight." Dodger said quietly.

"I won't be gone any longer than I have to be." Rafe said in the tone of a vow.

"And I'll be waiting for as long as it takes." Dodger said sincerely, then pulled completely out of the hug.

* * * * *

"Could you use some help?" Dodger asked, smiling, as he walked into the kitchen.

"Well look at you! I guess there was a real person hiding out in that monkey suit, after all." Mavis said with a chuckle.

Dodger grinned at the statement.

"You know how to sort beans?" Mavis asked casually.

"Yep. I've been doing it since I was about four years old." Dodger said frankly.

"Beans are over in the canvas bag by the door. It'll take about a gallon to feed this bunch." Mavis said seriously as she handed him a large bowl and a cooking pot.

"How many are you feeding?" Dodger asked as he scooped into the bag of dried beans.

"With you and the doctor, that'll make us thirteen." Mavis said thoughtfully.

"It's gonna be just like home, then." Dodger said with a chuckle as he carried the bowl back to the table.

"How's that?" Mavis asked as she dredged pieces of rabbit through an egg wash, then rolled them in flour.

"There were thirteen of us in my family. I'm used to having to cook for that many." Dodger said frankly, then set the cooking pot in his lap and scattered a few handfuls of beans on the table.

"I thought the women folk were usually given the cooking duties." Mavis said frankly.

"In our house, it was always the youngest who got stuck working with Ma. Everyone else was out doing the heavy labor on the farm." Dodger said distantly as he looked for twigs and stones mixed in with the dried pinto beans

"Like this ain't heavy labor?" Mavis said with a chuckle. "Plus, I'd like to see any of them in here trying to figure out how to feed this bunch with the fixins we got."

Dodger smiled, then said, "Yeah. That's how it was at home, too."

"Is that why you ain't there anymore?" Mavis asked curiously.

"No. It wasn't the cooking or cleaning or even working every waking hour of the day that got to me." Dodger said distantly. "It was that the whole time I was doing my best and giving everything I had to give, they all acted like I was a useless burden. I wasn't even wanting a 'thank you', I just wanted them to act like what I was doing mattered, some."

"You're better off then. That's one thing I'll say for Sam and the boys, they do appreciate havin' someone takin care of 'em." Mavis said firmly. "Of course, they know that the minute they don't appreciate me, I'm gonna do some ranch work and let one of them try to take care of this bunch for a while."

"That'll teach 'em." Dodger said with a chuckle.

* * * * *

"Dodger?" Rafe said, as he entered the kitchen.

"Hey Rafe. How's your patient?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Would you have a little time to come downstairs?" Rafe asked quietly.

"Yeah. I'm just about done here." Dodger said, as he moved the pot of beans off his lap.

"You go on and help the doctor. I'll put this away." Mavis said seriously.

"Are you sure?" Dodger asked uncertainly.

"Yeah. Thanks to you doin' that, I've got plenty of free time. Now go on." Mavis said and made a shooing motion.

Before Dodger could reach the doorway, Mavis said, "And thanks for your help. *I* appreciate it."

Dodger smiled and said, "Any time."

* * * * *

"Dodger, if you wouldn't mind too much, I could really use your help." Rafe said quietly as he stopped in the hallway.

"Of course I'll help, but what can I do?" Dodger asked curiously.

"You heard some of what that boy has been through." Rafe said quietly.

Dodger nodded.

"His injuries are even worse than I expected. Sam did a good job of patching him up, but he's kept the boy sedated since the attack. That isn't healthy for an extended period. Sam needs to get back to the business of running the ranch, and I need to try to figure out why the boy is immune." Rafe said carefully.

Dodger could tell that Rafe was working up to what was going to be asked of him.

"Since you did such a good job with Little Joe on the plane, I thought that, if you're willing, you could stay with the boy and help him to deal with everything that's happened to him." Rafe finished hopefully.

Dodger thought for a moment, then quietly said, "Of course, I'll do anything I can, but Rafe, think about what he's been through. How can anyone deal with that?"

"That part is going to be up to him. I think that all you can do is be there to answer his questions and to hold him when he cries." Rafe said frankly.

"But what do I tell him?" Dodger asked quietly.

"The truth. The truth is always best," Rafe said simply. "It may hurt, but... if he knows that you're being honest with him, it may give him someone that he can trust when everything else around him seems to have fallen apart or been taken away."

"I'll do my best." Dodger said quietly.

"And I'll be right there to help you if you need me for anything." Rafe said gently.

Dodger took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. "Okay. I'm ready."

* * * * *

As Dodger walked downstairs, he noticed a surprisingly young looking man standing at the bedside of a young boy.

The man appeared to be about twenty years old and looked as if he'd be right at home wearing a leather jacket and riding a motorcycle. Something about the icy twinkle in his gray eyes spoke of a certain lawlessness inherent in his nature.

The boy lying on the table had black hair and was obviously of Hispanic origin. He looked to be too thin, and was somewhat pale.

"Dodger, this is Sam. He and Mavis own this place." Rafe said seriously as he indicated the would-be motorcycle punk. "Sam, this is Dodger."

"Hey, Dodger. I hope you're up to this." Sam said with a look of concern at the boy on the bed.

"I hope so, too." Dodger said quietly, then asked, "But what's my other choice?"

Sam smiled, then said with a weary chuckle, "I suppose we're all over that same barrel since this little guy came into our lives."

Dodger walked to the bed, and his heart broke at the pale, frail looking boy with most of his upper body covered in gauze pads and bandages.

"He was flinching and thrashing a little bit while you were upstairs, so he'll probably be coming out of it, soon." Sam said quietly to Rafe.

"We'll take care of him." Rafe said assuringly.

"Give a yell if you need anything." Sam said with resignation.

"We'll do that." Rafe said seriously.

Sam gave one last concerned look at the boy, then started walking toward the stairs.

* * * * *

Dodger sat down in the chair beside the boy's bed and, on instinct, took one of the small hands into his.

"Call if you need me for anything." Rafe said gently.

Dodger looked up at Rafe, then nodded slowly.

After a moment, Dodger felt the small hand tighten on his.

"¿Que pasa?" the boy muttered as his eyes fluttered open.

Dodger puzzled over the words for a moment, then hesitantly said, "I don't know what you're saying. Do you speak English?"

"Yes." The boy said as he squinted to see Dodger, "My mama... she's like you."

"Like me?" Dodger asked hesitantly.

"White." the boy said shyly.

Dodger smiled, then said, "Well, that's good. This way we'll be able to talk."

"What happened?" The boy asked groggily.

"A lot of things. But you're in a safe place and I'm here to take care of you." Dodger whispered gently.

The boy looked around curiously.

"What's your name?" Dodger asked carefully.

"Jimmy... erm, James. But everyone calls me Jimmy." the boy said slowly.

"It's nice to meet you, Jimmy." Dodger said with a sincere smile. "My name is really Desmond, but everyone calls me Dodger."

Jimmy looked at Dodger for a moment, then smiled and slightly nodded.

"Do you need anything right now?" Dodger asked gently.

"I'm thirsty." Jimmy said quietly.

"I'll go get you something. Just stay still and I'll be right back." Dodger said with a smile.

"Who's that?" Jimmy asked, looking across the room.

"That's Rafe, he's a doctor. If you need something when I'm not around, you can ask him." Dodger said gently.

"Is he nice?" Jimmy asked cautiously.

"He's probably the nicest person that I ever met." Dodger said warmly.

Jimmy looked from Dodger to Rafe, but didn't say anything.

"I'll be right back." Dodger said as he gave Jimmy's hand a final squeeze.

Jimmy slightly nodded, then watched as Dodger left.

* * * * *

"Rafe, Jimmy is thirsty. Is it okay for him to drink something?" Dodger asked as he hurried to Rafe's side.

"Yes. Just try not to give him too much at once, it could cause him to vomit and he doesn't need that strain on his injuries." Rafe said without looking up from his microscope.

"I'll watch out." Dodger said before hurrying away.

* * * * *

"I got you some ice water." Dodger said as he rushed back to Jimmy's side. "Let me help you sit up and you can have a drink."

"What happened to me? Did I get hurt?" Jimmy asked in confusion.

"Yes." Dodger said quietly. "I don't know too much about it, but you were bitten quite a few times."

Jimmy blinked in confusion as he seemed to be trying to remember.

"I'm going to try to help you sit up, but you'll need to tell me if it's hurting you." Dodger said as he gently put his arm behind Jimmy's shoulders.

"Okay." Jimmy said hesitantly.

"Up, just a little." Dodger urged.

Jimmy made a little sound of effort as he sat up with Dodger's help, but he didn't sound like he was in pain.

"Here you go." Dodger said, as he handed the glass of water to Jimmy. "Drink it slow, or it'll make your head hurt."

After a few long drinks of water, Jimmy stopped and breathed deeply.

"Are you hurting?" Dodger asked with concern.

"I feel like I'm still partly asleep." Jimmy said slowly.

"From what I've heard, you were given some medicine to make you sleep. It's still wearing off, so you may feel sleepy for a while." Dodger said gently, then added, "And since you've been hurt, you're probably going to want to sleep a lot, so you can heal. That takes a lot of energy."

"Where's my mama?" Jimmy asked as he looked into Dodger's eyes.

"I just arrived here a few hours ago, so I don't know very much." Dodger said carefully, "But as far as I know, you're the only one from the farmhouse that is still alive."

Jimmy's eyes went wide as his hand started to shake.

Dodger quickly took the glass of water out of his hand before he could drop it, and eased the boy back down onto the bed.

"I'm sorry, Jimmy. I didn't want to hurt you." Dodger whispered, "But I wanted you to know the truth. Lies might be easier to hear, but you still end up having to hear the truth eventually."

Jimmy was trembling and didn't seem to hear Dodger's words.

"It's okay to cry." Dodger whispered as he moved closer to gently hug the boy.

"Daddy says that boys ain't s'posed to cry." Jimmy fought to say.

"I think he probably meant about little things, like a stubbed toe or a skinned knee." Dodger said quietly, "But about big things like this, it's okay."

That seemed to be all that Jimmy needed to hear.

Dodger accepted the younger boy into his arms and held him firmly as Jimmy began to cry in earnest.

"It's okay, Jimmy. You're safe." Dodger whispered as tears filled his own eyes.

* * * * *

"How's he doing?" Rafe asked, as he walked to Dodger's side.

"He cried himself to sleep." Dodger said quietly.

"He needs the rest." Rafe said with a sympathetic look at the boy lying, sleeping before him.

"Oh, Rafe. What's going to happen to him?" Dodger asked anxiously.

"Something good." Rafe said quietly.

Dodger looked at Rafe with surprise at the answer.

"We'll see to it." Rafe said seriously.

Dodger thought about it for a moment, then nodded his agreement.

Chapter 11

"The sun's going to be down anytime now. When the hands get here, we're going to sit down to dinner." Mavis called down the stairs into the basement.

"Why don't you go and have dinner with the others? I have a few more things I'd like to get set up." Rafe said gently.

"Yeah. I'll bring you down a plate, as soon as I'm finished." Dodger said as he walked to Rafe's side.

"Don't worry, Dodger. Everything is going to be fine." Rafe said quietly.

"I sure hope so." Dodger said as he stared into Rafe's eyes. "I just have the feeling that we're a thousand miles away from anyone who would even want to help us, if things somehow go wrong."

"Sam's a good man. Just be honest with him, and he'll do everything in his power to make sure that things turn out for the best." Rafe said quietly.

"Best for who?" Dodger asked anxiously.

"All of us." Rafe said with a forced smile, then added more quietly, "I hope."

Dodger nodded, then moved in to give Rafe a tender kiss.

It wasn't exactly passionate, but it was definitely something more than casual. The kiss said 'I love you' more clearly than words.

"Enjoy your meal." Rafe said as he held Dodger tightly in his arms.

"I'll be back as soon as I can." Dodger said with a regretful smile as he slowly backed away.

* * * * *

Dodger walked upstairs and found only Sam sitting at the table.

"Come on over and sit down, son. The guys will be up from the bunkhouse any minute." Sam said casually.

Bruce walked into the room, looking a bit rumpled and it was obvious that he had been sleeping.

"You gonna be alright to work tonight, Bruce?" Sam asked curiously.

"Yeah, I think I am. But I was thinkin' that I could get the boys all lined up on what needed to be done, just in case I needed to hit the hay early." Bruce said frankly.

"Let me know if there's anything I need to follow behind 'em and check up on." Sam said seriously.

"Yeah. I'll let you know." Bruce said thoughtfully, then glanced at Dodger and broke into a smile.

"Looks like you're gettin' settled in pretty good." Bruce said with a teasing grin.

Dodger puzzled over the words for a moment, then remembered that the last time Bruce had seen him had been when he was wearing the tailored suit.

"Yeah. Well, these are my regular clothes. I just wore the other stuff to travel." Dodger said casually, then at Bruce's curious stare, he continued, "People treat you a lot better if you look like you got money."

Sam laughed aloud at the statement, then said, "I bet they do."

Dodger glanced at Bruce, to find him chuckling and nodding his agreement.

"Bruce, do you have anything lined up for Justus, tomorrow?" Sam asked seriously.

"Nothing important." Bruce said casually. "You got something for him to do?"

"I was thinking that the Doc and Dodger ain't gonna be able to stay with the boy 24/7. Justus could stay downstairs with him and give the guys some time to rest." Sam said frankly.

"Do you think the boy is in good enough shape to come upstairs? Because if he is, Justus could still do pretty much everything he needs to, while the boy is on the couch." Bruce asked thoughtfully.

"You'll need to ask the Doc to be sure, but I don't see any reason why not." Sam said with a nod of approval.

Sam turned his attention to Dodger and said, "I'm guessin' that you and the Doc keep a daytime schedule."

"Yes. that's right. Rafe has a job during the day, and I've been spending the days studying." Dodger responded quickly.

"Well, just so you know, we keep a night schedule around here. It just don't make sense for us to be up very much during the daylight. Me and Bruce and Mavis usually get up in the late afternoon so we can compare notes and make plans. Everyone else gets up at about sundown and a lot of times we keep on workin until around sunup." Sam said frankly.

"Yeah. And Justus stays up during the day to take care of phone calls and the like. And he keeps an eye on the place while the rest of us are sleeping." Bruce added.

"I don't know how Rafe will want to do things. I guess we'll figure it out in the next few days." Dodger said thoughtfully.

A noise drew Dodger's attention, and he saw a group of five men walking into the room.

One of the men looked to be about 35, three of them seemed to be in their early to mid twenties and the last one looked like he might be the same age as Dodger.

"Y'all sit down. As soon as Mavis and Justus git in here, I'll make introductions."

As if on cue, Mavis walked into the room, carrying a large pan of oven-fried rabbit.

"Can I help you carry anything in?" Dodger asked immediately.

"No thanks, hun. We've got it." Mavis said with a smile, as a man walked into the room from the kitchen. The man was tall, blond and appeared to be about 30 years old. At first, Dodger thought he might have been laughing at his offer, or possibly something that Mavis had said to him. But after a moment, Dodger began to realize that the man seemed to have a perpetual grin.

"I guess y'all noticed Dodger, here. He came with the Doc." Sam said frankly.

"I get why the Doc is here, but what good are you?" The man who looked like the oldest of them asked Dodger sourly.

"That's Laramie, you'll have to forgive him." Sam said with resignation, then added, "He's like that."

"And besides, Dodger's already been more help to me today than you've ever been." Mavis added with a forceful glare at Laramie.

"I was just sayin' that things are tough around here, everyone has to do their part." Laramie said in his defense.

"Is that what you've been doing? Your part?" Mavis asked incredulously. "I think you've been doing a little more than that."

You could have heard a pin drop as all attention in the room was focused on Mavis and Laramie.

"I've noticed that a few of this season's calves look a little too much like **you**." Mavis said as she looked Laramie in the eyes.

Dodger couldn't tell who had laughed first, but it was only a moment before everyone at the table, including Laramie and Mavis, were laughing themselves silly.

When the laughter quieted, Mavis said in a more gentle tone, "Seriously, from what I've already seen, there's no need to worry; Dodger's going to be a big help around here."

"If Mavis is happy, then I'm happy." Sam said simply.

Laramie glanced at Dodger and gave him a nod, in what seemed to be his agreement to Sam's statement.

"Dodger, you know Mavis; on her other side is Justus. He's our day foreman, and a damned good butcher, to boot." Sam said firmly.

"Next to Justus are Scott and Eloy. You'll never see one without the other, so you might just as well think of them as one person." Sam said in a teasing tone.

"I have some friends back in Ohio who are like that, Ernie and Blake. They're twin brothers." Dodger said with a smile at the pair.

"We're not brothers." Scott said firmly as he looked Dodger in the eyes. "We're husbands."

"Oh, so are Ernie and Blake, they're married to a woman named Manna." Dodger said with a smile, then added, "And Rafe, the doctor downstairs, is my husband."

Scott and Eloy seemed to relax at Dodger's announcement.

"You've sort of met Laramie. He's our farrier." Sam said as he indicated the older looking man at the far end of the table.

"He's also the one who made the wrought iron gate out front." Bruce added from Dodger's side.

"I like the gate. That's some nice work." Dodger said immediately.

Laramie gave a quick smile and a slight nod at the compliment.

"Past Laramie is Chet. If you ever feel like going out and getting your hands dirty, you'll probably be working with him." Sam said frankly.

"I might do that." Dodger said, as he smiled at the young looking man.

Chet smiled a broad sunny smile in return.

"Beside you is Arturo. One of the best hands I've ever worked with." Sam said proudly.

"Hola." Arturo said with a friendly smile.

"Um, hi." Dodger said uncertainly.

"You don't have a problem with Mexicans, do you?" Arturo asked cautiously.

"I don't think so. Actually, I don't think I've ever met any before." Dodger said seriously

Arturo broke into a grin, then said, "You talk funny."

Dodger smiled and said, "So do you."

"Don't worry, amigo. I don't think we'll have any problems." Arturo said happily.

"Well, that just leaves Bruce, who you already met." Sam said seriously. "He's the night foreman and pretty much runs the day-to-day operations."

"Y'all dig in, before it gets cold." Mavis said quickly.

"It looks good. What's the occasion?" Sam asked as he put some mashed potatoes on his plate, then passed the bowl.

"We had company comin'. I thought I could do a little somethin extra." Mavis said simply.

"It looks great." Dodger said quickly.

"Yeah. It smells wonderful too." Sam said with a loving look at his wife.

* * * * *

"Dodger, you smell like day people." Arturo said frankly.

"Yeah, I know. I just changed yesterday." Dodger said shyly.

"You changed yesterday and you're travelling across the country today? I guess they're making city boys tougher than they used to." Justus said in an impressed tone.

"I've lived in the city for less than a year. I was raised on a farm up in the hills." Dodger said seriously.

"That explains it." Justus said with a nod, "A city boy would probably be whining and sniveling for a week."

"More like a month." Bruce said, from Dodger's side, then asked, "Blood?"

Dodger turned to look at Bruce curiously and found him holding a silver pitcher.

"Oh. Um... yeah, please." Dodger said nervously, then quietly admitted, "I haven't had blood before."

"Really?" Bruce asked with surprise as he filled Dodger's glass.

"Do you think you're going to have a problem with it?" Mavis asked curiously from across the table.

"I don't know." Dodger said honestly.

"Do you eat steak?" Chet asked from two places down from him.

"Yes." Dodger said as he leaned forward a little to see him.

"If you eat that part of the cow, what's the difference about eating this part?" Chet asked seriously.

Dodger thought for a moment, then said, "Thanks, Chet, that makes it easier."

Chet smiled, and Dodger got the feeling that Chet really appreciated it.

He could feel everyone in the room trying to look like they weren't watching him.

Dodger took the glass into his hand and realized that the blood was warm.

He knew himself well enough to know that if he put it off, he could talk himself out of it. So he brought the glass to his lips and took a long, slow drink.

Dodger considered the taste as he set the glass down, then realized that the blood had satisfied a thirst that had been growing in him.

"Hey, that's really good." Dodger said with a big smile.

"That's one of the good things about living out here. We get first crack at the good stuff." Laramie said seriously.

"First crack?" Dodger asked curiously.

"We're a ranch. To keep afloat, we've got to sell off our cattle the best way we can. We sell the meat to the day folk, and we sell fresh blood to the night folk." Sam said honestly.

"During the lean times, it's the only way to keep the ranch profitable." Justus added frankly.

"When is the doctor coming up to eat?" Mavis asked curiously.

"He's still setting things up. I told him that I'd take him a plate when I finished." Dodger said honestly.

"I'm sure one of us could go down and keep an eye on things so your doctor can have a decent meal." Mavis said in a tone of voice that was nothing short of a command. "It's only right that the doctor should be able to have a sit down meal at the table with the rest of us."

"I'm about done. I can go down and stay with the boy." Justus said with his perpetual good natured smile.

"Get with me when you're done." Sam said firmly.

Justus nodded, then quickly wolfed down the last few bites of food from his plate.

"So Bruce, what have you got lined up for tonight?" Sam asked casually.

"Well, I was thinking that while the guys go ahead with the normal chores, I could ride the South fence. I think the south pasture is ready for grazing again." Bruce said seriously.

"I'll get your horse ready." Chet said immediately.

Bruce smiled and nodded.

"If we're going to be driving cattle, I'll need to check the horses." Laramie said firmly.

"After the chores." Bruce said with a nod.

Laramie looked a little put out by the answer, but reluctantly agreed.

Most of the others around the table were passing food, getting second helpings. Dodger felt a little bit funny about it, but he was enjoying the food so much that he finally decided to go ahead and get second helpings for himself, although they were smaller than the first.

* * * * *

"Did you need me for something?" Rafe asked cautiously as he walked into the kitchen.

"Mavis just thought that you might enjoy having dinner with the rest of us, being that it's your first night here, and all." Sam said frankly.

"Yes, that would be nice. Thank you." Rafe said politely and took a seat in the chair that had been vacated by Justus.

Although Dodger was well used to seeing Rafe in his three-piece tailored suit, somehow seeing him in it now felt completely wrong. Everyone else was wearing casual clothes and it made Rafe stand out.

"How's the boy?" Bruce asked into the silence that had fallen over the table.

Rafe accepted an empty plate from Mavis with a smile of thanks, then said, "So far, so good."

Bruce nodded at the vague answer.

"Would you like some blood?" Mavis asked as she held the silver pitcher.

"Yes, thank you." Rafe said with a smile.

Mavis leaned in and filled his glass.

"So Doc, Dodger's been telling us that y'all keep a day schedule back home. Most of us keep a night schedule here, so I was wondering how you'd want to do things." Sam said frankly.

Rafe put a scoop of mashed potatoes on his plate, then turned to Sam and said, "I suppose I'll probably switch to a night schedule. Given the choice, I always prefer to be awake at night so I'm free to go outside for fresh air if I need a break."

Sam nodded that he understood.

"I'm going to need to make a call in the morning to arrange for some equipment and supplies." Rafe said casually before taking a bite of food.

"I figured as much." Sam said casually. "We don't have phone service all the way out here. Just the short wave. If you'll get with Justus, he'll help you get everything set up. He knows the ins and outs of getting things done outside the ranch."

"I won't need much." Rafe said with a smile. "On the flight here, I was thinking about all the things I would need, to be able to do my work. I didn't expect for you to have very much on hand. You've got a really nice setup, down there."

"Yeah. Well, I do my best to see to the health of the horses and cattle." Sam said frankly.

Rafe took a drink of his blood, then smiled with satisfaction.

"Ya like that?" Bruce asked with a grin at Rafe's reaction.

"It's been quite a while." Rafe said happily. "Drinking fresh blood like this, reminds me of when I was a child."

"I've been thinking that you're not going to be able to spend 24 hours a day down in the basement. If you think that the boy can come upstairs, Justus could keep an eye on him during the day, while you're sleeping." Sam said seriously.

"Well, Jimmy isn't well enough to walk. But if someone could carry him upstairs, I don't see any problem with that." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"Good." Sam said with a nod.

Dodger noticed that everyone else around the table seemed to be watching Rafe, but they weren't willing to interact with him. The comfortable atmosphere and companionable conversation from earlier was notably absent in Rafe's presence.

* * * * *

"Before we go downstairs, I need to talk with you for a minute." Rafe said as they left the kitchen.

Dodger was concerned by the serious tone in Rafe's voice and followed along quietly.

As soon as they were inside their bedroom and the door was closed, Rafe pulled Dodger into a desperate hug.

The level of Dodger's concern increased. In the months that he had known Rafe, he'd never seen anything bother him before.

"I'm so glad you're here, Love," Rafe whispered, then moved in to give Dodger a full, deep kiss.

All of Dodger's concern melted away until he felt nothing but peace, love and joy.

When the kiss finally ended, Rafe backed away enough to look Dodger in the eyes.

It took a moment for Dodger to remember his concern, but he finally looked at Rafe with full worry as he asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing.... or everything. I'm not sure yet." Rafe said with a pained look in his eyes. "I guess it just finally hit me. I wasn't expecting to feel so... uprooted. I suppose I've been living a secure, well-insulated life for too many years. You being here with me is the only thing that's going to make this bearable."

"I'm glad to be able to help." Dodger said with a timid smile.

"We'd better get downstairs so Justus can get to work." Rafe said with regret.

"One more kiss?" Dodger asked hopefully.

Rafe smiled as he said, "Anything for you."

* * * * *

"How's he doing?" Rafe asked as soon as he was off the stairs.

"He hasn't moved." Justus said with a concerned look at the boy.

"Thank you for watching out for him." Rafe said sincerely.

"If you ever need my help for anything, all you have to do is ask. I'm usually around." Justus said in his perpetually cheerful way.

"Well, since you offered..." Rafe said in prelude.

Justus raised his eyebrows in expectation.

"Sam mentioned that you handle most things that need to be taken care of outside the ranch." Rafe said seriously.

"Yep, that I do." Justus said with a nod.

"I'm going to need to get some supplies in here. I have a contact back in Columbus who can get those things for me. I'll need to get in touch with him." Rafe said seriously.

Justus nodded.

"I suppose all he'll really need is my list and to know where to ship it." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"Ain't no such a thing." Justus said in a resigned tone. "Least ways, not all the way out here. As soon as you have your list ready, I'll see how much we're talking about and figure out how's best to do it."

"I should have the list done before morning." Rafe said seriously.

"Well, that works out fine, then. I sleep during the night, so I'll just come down and check in with you when I wake up." Justus said with a smile.

"Thank you. I'll see you then." Rafe said with a responding smile, then added. "Have a good sleep."

"I'll still be up for a while. Like I said before, if y'all need anything, I'll be around." Justus said as he glanced at Dodger to be sure that he knew that he was included in the offer.

"If I need any help, I'll call. I promise." Rafe said seriously.

Justus nodded once, then headed for the stairs.

* * * * *

As Dodger sat by Jimmy's bed, he kept quiet watch on what Rafe was doing.

He couldn't help but be impressed. Even though he didn't have the slightest clue about what Rafe was actually doing, he knew that whatever it was, was to help Jimmy, and ultimately, the entire shadeside community.

"Mama?" Jimmy said weakly.

Dodger turned his attention to the boy on the bed.

"How are you feeling, Jimmy?" Dodger asked with concern.

"Hungry?" Jimmy said uncertainly.

Dodger smiled, then said, "That must mean that you're getting better."

Jimmy looked at him with confusion.

"I'm going to go ask Rafe what you can have to eat. I'll be right back." Dodger said gently.

Jimmy slowly nodded, then watched as Dodger hurried across the room.

* * * * *

"You're a lucky duck." Dodger said with a grin as he approached the bed again.

Jimmy looked anything but lucky, with his upper body mostly covered by bandages, but the statement captured Jimmy's attention.

"Rafe says that if you're well enough to be asking for food, that you certainly should be allowed to have it." Dodger said cheerfully.

Jimmy gave him a weak, uncertain smile in return.

"Now, just lay here and relax and I'm going to go get you some mashed potatoes and gravy. How does that sound?" Dodger asked with excitement.

Jimmy seemed to finally be drawn into Dodger's cheerful mood and said, "It sounds good."

"Okay, I'll be right back." Dodger said gently, then hurried toward the stairs.

* * * * *

"Dr. Rafe?" Jimmy called across the room.

"Yes. Can I get you something, Jimmy?" Rafe asked as he walked to Jimmy's bedside.

"Why is Dodger being so nice to me?" Jimmy asked cautiously.

"Because he's a nice person. The longer you're around him, the more you'll notice it. He treats everyone like that."

Jimmy nodded as he thought about the words.

"Is something bothering you?" Rafe asked at the unusual contemplative look on the boy's face.

"Did my grandpa pay you to steal me away from my daddy?" Jimmy asked cautiously.

"No." Rafe said with surprise. "I honestly don't know anything about anyone in your family."

Jimmy watched Rafe's expression carefully, but didn't seem to be convinced.

"Is your grandpa the kind of person who would try to steal you?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"He hates my daddy, real bad. He wanted me and my mama to go live with him..." Jimmy trailed off.

"...But your momma wanted to stay living with your daddy." Rafe said, completing the thought.

Jimmy nodded, then quietly said, "We've been staying with my Uncle Hector and Aunt Neva."

Rafe nodded that he had heard.

"Dodger said that he thinks they're dead." Jimmy said in almost a whisper.

Rafe hesitantly nodded, then said, "It's possible that someone either got away or wasn't home when it happened, but as far as we know, you're the only one who was there that was left alive."

"Why can't I remember what happened?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Probably because, as tough as little boys are, sometimes something comes along that's just too big to deal with. Your brain knows that, and puts those memories away in a safe place until you're better and can handle it." Rafe said gently.

Jimmy stared at Rafe uncertainly for a moment, then said, "Dodger was right. You're nice."

"I think you're nice, too." Rafe said with a grin.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs drew their attention.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry that took so long, but I wanted to make sure that everything was hot." Dodger said as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"That's okay. It gave Jimmy and me a chance to talk." Rafe said with a smile.

"Were you talking about me?" Dodger asked playfully.

"I'm not telling." Rafe said with a grin and a wink at Jimmy.

"Let's get you sitting up, Jimmy. I brought you a big plate of mashed potatoes and gravy." Dodger said with a smile.

"It smells good." Jimmy said as he fought to sit up.

"Let me help you." Rafe said as he hurried to Jimmy's side.

"Thanks." Jimmy said as Rafe put an arm behind him and helped him to sit upright.

Rafe took Jimmy's pillows and wedged them in behind him to give him a little bit of support.

"I hope you like this." Dodger said with a smile.

Jimmy's eyes got wide as he looked at the plate filled with food.

"I don't know if I can eat all of this." Jimmy said hesitantly.

"I brought you plenty, so you can eat as much as you want. But don't worry if you don't finish it. I'll put it in the refrigerator upstairs and I'm sure someone will eat it." Dodger said simply, "At least, that's how it always worked back home."

"It looks like you guys have this under control, so I'll get back to my work." Rafe said with a tender smile at the pair.

"What are you working on?" Jimmy asked curiously.

Rafe paused for a moment, then said, "That could take some time to explain. Why don't you eat your dinner now, and I'll sit down with you and tell you about it, later?"

Jimmy thought for a moment, then nodded his agreement.

Rafe smiled, then walked to the other side of the room to get back to work.

* * * * *

"He's asleep again." Dodger said as he walked to join Rafe in the small lab area.

"I'd expect that, at least for the next few days." Rafe said frankly.

"Is there anything I can do?" Dodger asked curiously.

"I can think of one thing." Rafe said honestly.

Dodger expected the next statement to be some sort of sexual innuendo... not that he minded that at all.

No one had ever paid much attention to him before, and to have someone 'in love' with him was almost intoxicating.

"You can go upstairs and get some rest." Rafe said seriously.

Dodger blinked, not knowing if he had missed something.

"You've been up all day, already. I know you've got to be tired." Rafe said frankly.

Dodger thought for a moment, then said, "Maybe I should be, but I'm not."

"I'm sure that as soon as you lie down for a few minutes, it'll all catch up with you." Rafe said seriously.

"You said that we're going to be on a night schedule, so now's as good a time as any for me to get used to staying up all night." Dodger said honestly.

Rafe thought about it for a moment, then nodded before saying, "Alright. But I still want you to go upstairs. If you won't get some sleep, then visit with Mavis or one of the guys."

"You don't want me down here?" Dodger asked bravely, as he felt a sinking feeling wash over him.

"Of course I want you here." Rafe said immediately, as he pulled Dodger into a hug. "But the truth is, I'm going to have to change Jimmy's dressings, and I don't want you to have to see what's underneath all that."

Dodger thought about it for a moment, then reluctantly nodded.

"Besides, I think it would be best if you got into the habit of taking breaks and spending some time doing other things besides taking care of Jimmy. Being a full-time nursemaid can wear down even the strongest of people." Rafe said frankly.

"But I want to help." Dodger said quietly.

"And I really do want your help." Rafe said assuringly, then added, "But I also want what's best for you. Trust me. Taking care of Jimmy every waking moment of your day will consume you. It's no way to live."

Dodger didn't really understand what Rafe was saying, but he trusted that Rafe knew what he was talking about, and reluctantly agreed.

"Good." Rafe said with a smile, then moved in to give Dodger a firm kiss.

Dodger felt the arms wrapped around him and the lips gliding against his, and realized that it didn't matter where they were. As long as they were together, they were home.

* * * * *

"Bruce!" Dodger said when he spotted him by the barn.

"Dodger? What can I do for you?" Bruce asked as he approached.

"Actually, that's what I was going to ask you." Dodger said frankly.

At Bruce's curious look, Dodger continued, "Rafe doesn't need me to be downstairs, right now, so I'd be willing to help out here if there's something I can do."

"That's mighty nice of you, Dodger." Bruce said in an impressed voice, then cautiously asked, "Do you ride?"

"Sure. I'm not an expert horseman or anything, but I know how to get up there and stay up there." Dodger said frankly.

Bruce chuckled, then said, "Well, I suppose those are the main things."

"Is there something I can do to help?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"I was needing to ride the fences in the South pasture. If you wanted, you could come along with me." Bruce said frankly.

"Well, I don't know how much help I'll be, but I'd be happy to go along." Dodger said honestly.

"Trust me, having someone else to talk to out in the middle of nowhere is a big help to me." Bruce said seriously.

"Count me in." Dodger said with a smile.

"Let's go down and see if Chet has a horse for you." Bruce said as he gestured back toward the barn, then stopped and seriously added, "Remember to go slow until they're used to you. Horses are naturally afraid of us, but ours have been trained to accept us."

"I'll be sure to be careful."

* * * * *

Dodger was in awe of his new senses as they rode through the night.

After just a few minutes away from the farm, Dodger realized that the large flashlight that Bruce was using was for the horses benefit.

He could see as clearly as if it were daytime. His ears caught each and every rustling leaf in the distance. He could smell the slightest nuances of different scents.

But one glance at the night sky and all else was forgotten. The stars looked close enough to touch. And they were... everywhere. The sight was literally breathtaking.

After riding in silence for a while, Dodger finally noticed Bruce's pensive expression and quietly asked, "Is something wrong?"

Caught somewhat off guard by the question, Bruce let slip, "Is this all there is?"

"How do you mean?" Dodger asked curiously.

Bruce realized what he had said, then shook his head dismissively.

"No, really. I'd like to know what you mean." Dodger said honestly.

Bruce slowed his horse, then turned to Dodger as he quietly asked, "Is this all that I'm ever going to be?"

Dodger thought about the question for a moment, then hesitantly broke into a smile.

Bruce raised his eyebrows in surprise at the reaction.

"I've asked myself questions like that quite a few times over the past few years." Dodger said honestly.

"And did you find any answers?" Bruce asked curiously.

"Yeah. But usually after I'd given up looking for them." Dodger said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. That sounds about right." Bruce said with a reluctant, lopsided smile.

"When I was living on the farm with my family, I felt like I didn't have a future. I figured I'd just grow up and be exactly like my pa. There just wasn't any other choice." Dodger said, then slowly looked up at the countless number of stars above them.

"I guess things didn't turn out the way you expected." Bruce said as he also looked up.

"I wish I could say that things changed because I had the courage to make them change. But honestly, things just got way too bad on the farm for me to stay there. If things had stayed the same... I don't know; I guess I'd still be there, dreaming about something better." Dodger said regretfully.

"I've been doing this my whole life." Bruce said distantly.

"So you've been with Sam since you changed?" Dodger asked quietly.

"Well, yeah. But what I meant was, that even before I was turned, I worked on a ranch. Ever since I was old enough to get in a saddle, I've been doing this." Bruce said distantly.

"And you're ready for something else?" Dodger asked curiously.

"There ain't nothin else for someone like me." Bruce said frankly. "Could you see me as a city person?"

Dodger chuckled and said, "I was born a hoopie and that's what I'll always be. Rafe may have dressed me up, all nice and fancy, but he never once tried to change me."

"Sam needs me here. There's no way I could leave." Bruce said regretfully.

"A few years ago, I would have said the same thing about my family." Dodger said frankly. "But things change, people change. You'll know when it's time."

"But what would I do?" Bruce asked distantly. "I've been doing this for so long, I wouldn't know how to do anything else."

"If the day comes that you're ready for a change, you can come to Columbus. Rafe and I will find something for you. We have tons of friends who would be happy to help."

"Are you sure that your doctor friend won't have a problem with that?" Bruce asked cautiously.

"When Rafe found me, I was just a skinny kid with only a sixth grade education. I can't imagine a more useless person than I was. But he didn't even think twice about helping me." Dodger said seriously. "Look at you. You're a responsible and hardworking man. I haven't been here very long, but I can see that Sam trusts you with quite a bit around here. So I think that finding a place for you to fit in will probably be the easiest thing in the world."

"Thanks. If things do change around here and I need to go, I'll get in touch." Bruce said with a lopsided smile at Dodger.

"Are we ready to get back to the fences?" Dodger asked as he looked around.

"Yeah. Let's finish up, so we can get back to the house." Bruce said casually as he turned his horse.

* * * * *

After returning from riding the fences, Dodger found Rafe hard at work and Jimmy fast asleep. He interrupted Rafe's work just long enough to give him a quick kiss, then went upstairs to find something else to do.

He met Mavis in the kitchen, and it seemed that she was just about to start on cooking something.

"Can I help with anything?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"I tell you what, Dodger, just having someone around who wants to help is enough to turn my whole day around." Mavis said cheerfully.

"Does that mean that there isn't anything for me to do?" Dodger asked curiously.

"You can stay in here and keep me company while I make us a big batch of biscuits to go with dinner." Mavis said frankly.

"I make biscuits all the time, back home. I could do that if you like." Dodger offered.

"You ain't never made biscuits up here. The altitude changes how everything works." Mavis said frankly as she lined up ingredients. "But once I've got the dough made, you can help."

"Oh. I didn't know that." Dodger said honestly, then added, "Yeah. Thanks."

"Tell me about you and the doc. Since you said that you just changed, yesterday, I'm guessin that there's quite a story there." Mavis said casually.

Dodger chuckled, then began to tell the tale of how he met Rafe.

* * * * *

When the biscuits were finally in the oven and the story of Rafe and Dodger's meeting was told, Mavis and Dodger sat and relaxed at the table.

"So, what about you and Sam? From the way you look at each other when you think no one else is looking, it seems like you're newlyweds. But the easy way you get along with each other makes it seem like you've been together for a good long time." Dodger said curiously.

"I grew up here. I mean, right here in this house." Mavis said as she gestured around. "About 40 years ago, there was a big ole ruckus in town, you know, about 85 miles from here."

"That close?" Dodger asked with a grin.

"Hell, that's right next door around these parts." Mavis said frankly.

Dodger chuckled and nodded.

"Anyway, my pa heard something about it when he was buying or selling something in town, but he never really told us much, except that they were a bunch of superstitious old ladies, believing in 'Skinwalkers'."

"Skinwalkers?" Dodger asked with surprise.

"People like us, Dodger." Mavis said frankly. "The natives had their own legends about us and must have spotted some night folk about."

"So what happened?" Dodger asked cautiously, not entirely sure that he wanted to know.

"That night there was a knock on the door." Mavis said, as her gaze became distant, as if she was seeing the whole thing unfolding right before her eyes.

Dodger slowly nodded, encouraging her to continue.

"We knew that someone had to be in real trouble if they were all the way out at our place after dark. So Pa opened the door. I don't know what all happened after that. Even now, forty years later, I can only remember flashes of it." Mavis finished absently.

A long moment of silence fell between them.

Eventually, Mavis whispered, "I got... turned."

Dodger fought to reign in his emotions. He was pretty sure from what had happened to Jimmy's family that he knew what had happened to her.

"Just when I thought I couldn't..." Mavis trailed off, then shook her head and began again, "Sammy showed up."

Dodger looked at her with surprise, having forgotten the initial purpose of the story.

"Him and Justus and Chet were tracking the critters, hoping to get to them before they got any more innocents." Mavis said as she finally met Dodger's eyes again.

Dodger nodded, then suddenly a question nagged at him and he had to ask, "Chet? The one out there now?"

Mavis nodded, "Don't let his pretty, young looks fool you, Dodger. Chet's older than all of us. Hell, for all I know, he may be older than all of us put together."

"But he looks my age." Dodger said with surprise.

"Looks don't mean much, with us." Mavis said frankly, "But even though Chet may be the oldest, he's a helluva hard worker and follows Sammy's lead. Just sometimes, if you look in his eyes... you can see the years."

Dodger slowly nodded, thinking that he sort of understood.

"Anyway, so Sammy and them show up. He finds me and tells Justus and Chet to go on and keep tracking them." Mavis said as her eyes seemed to be looking into the past. "He stayed with me through the day and held me. I don't think he ever stopped talking to me the whole time, though I couldn't tell you a word of it, today. I just know that it was all about hope and love and how wonderful the future could be."

"I could see Sam doing that." Dodger said gently. True, he hadn't spent much time with Sam at all. But his first impression told him that Sam had the capacity to be a very caring and tender person. His actions toward Jimmy had certainly proved that, if nothing else.

"When the night finally came again, Justus and Chet showed up here." Mavis said quietly. "They was both shocked as shit that I hadn't turned the bad way."

"I bet." Dodger said gently.

"It turns out that Justus and Chet caught up to them that... did it, and put 'em down." Mavis said darkly.

Dodger nodded that he understood.

"After that, Sam stayed with me, to make sure that I was going to be alright." Mavis said distantly. "Day after day, week after week, he just stayed with me and did everything he could to help me through it."

Dodger smiled at the words.

"I didn't realize it at the time, but while Sammy was taking care of me, Justus and Chet were taking care of the ranch. They saw to the animals and just kept the place going. I don't know why they did it... maybe just for something to do while Sammy was busy with me."

"Maybe they saw something worth preserving. The ranch seems like a special place." Dodger said honestly.

"Yeah." Mavis said gently. "And when I finally came back to myself, I realized what was going on and... I asked Sammy and the guys if they wanted for this to be their home."

"I'm guessing they said yes."

"Sammy did. And that's all that Justus needed. Him and Sammy have been travelling together for... let's just say 'a very long time'." Mavis finished with a secretive smile.

"What about Chet?" Dodger asked curiously.

"He seemed to feel like he was only being included out of some sense of obligation. I'm pretty sure he was about to go off on his own, when Sammy sat him down and told him that, to run a place this big, we needed his help."

"It's a good feeling to be needed." Dodger said gently.

"You got that right." Mavis said warmly. "So that's how me and Sammy got together. He helped me through the change... hell, he held me and talked me through it. If it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't have wanted to survive."

Dodger nodded slowly.

"Shit! The biscuits!" Mavis said as she dashed to the oven.

Dodger was immediately by her side.

After opening the oven door, Mavis let out a gust of breath in relief.

"They look great." Dodger said gently.

"Yeah. They do."

* * * * *

"Coyotes on the north forty!" Bruce called into the doorway.

"Hot damn!" Mavis said with delight as she checked to see that the stove was turned off.

"What's going on?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Come on, Dodger. We're going on a hunt." Mavis said before dashing out the door.

Dodger was only a step behind.

* * * * *

The feeling was like nothing Dodger had ever experienced before.

The group of them, travelling like a pack, ran into the night allowing their enhanced senses to guide them directly to their prey.

The only word that Dodger could assign to the sensation of running full-out was 'freedom'.

Finally he heard a commotion ahead of him and could tell that at least one of the coyotes had been taken down.

Dodger slowed his pace as he saw Bruce sitting on the ground with a dead coyote in his hands and a self-satisfied grin on his face.

"That was supposed to be mine." Arturo growled at Bruce, then started rattling off at him in Spanish.

Dodger didn't know the language at all, but from the inflections that Arturo was using, he imagined it wasn't the type of thing you'd say to your mother in church.

Finally Dodger's curiosity got the better of him and he asked Bruce, "What is he saying?"

"I don't know, something about his mother and a three legged donkey, I think." Bruce said with a grin up at Arturo.

Arturo glared at Bruce for a moment, then broke into a smile as he said, "I say TU madre... 'YOUR' mother."

In a flash of movement too fast for Dodger to see, Bruce launched himself from the ground and hooked Arturo around the neck with one arm as he pulled him down.

Dodger felt a spark of fear at the sudden, violent movement, but then relaxed when he saw that Bruce had Arturo pinned to the ground and was giving him noogies.

He couldn't help but smile at the sight, then he looked around to see how the others were doing with their hunt.

* * * * *

When Dodger arrived back at the house, he went downstairs to find Jimmy awake and alert.

"How are you feeling?" Dodger asked pleasantly.

"Fine." Jimmy said in a flat tone.

"Is something wrong?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Where's my grandpa? Are you going to take me to him, or is he coming to get me?" Jimmy asked darkly.

"Neither, as far as I know." Dodger said honestly.

"I don't believe you." Jimmy said simply, then continued, "The only white person who ever told me the truth was my mama."

"Oh!" Dodger said with sudden comprehension.

Jimmy looked up at him suspiciously.

"I'll be right back, there's someone that I think you should talk to." Dodger said seriously, then headed back toward the stairs.

* * * * *

"Arturo, this is Jimmy." Dodger said simply.

"Hola." Arturo said gently to the boy.

Dodger listened as Jimmy and Arturo began to talk in Spanish.

He was fascinated by the sound of it and by the fact that it seemed that their words flowed impossibly fast.

Their talk lasted for quite a while, but Jimmy's expression didn't seem to hold any hostility.

"I still have work to do, but I'll come and visit you again later, when my work is done." Arturo said as much to Dodger as to Jimmy.

Dodger nodded with a smile, then watched Arturo go.

After a moment, Jimmy quietly said, "Dodger?"

"Do you need something?" Dodger asked as he hurried to Jimmy's side.

"I'm sorry I said that, before." Jimmy said timidly.

Dodger couldn't resist the urge and leaned in to give Jimmy a reassuring hug.

"I understand how it is, Jimmy. I was raised not to trust 'town people' because they'll try to trick you with their big city ways and then steal from you." Dodger said frankly.

"But... town people are just the same as ranch people." Jimmy said with confusion.

"Yep, That's right." Dodger said gently. "And brown people are the same as white people. The people who tell you anything different are just trying to stir up hate so they can control you."

"How?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"If they can get you to hate and distrust, then they know what drives you and how you'll react. They know exactly what to do to make you do what they want. Fear and hate are their tools." Dodger said simply.

"How do you know that?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"I read it somewhere." Dodger said with a shrug. "I like to read a lot."

"I have trouble reading." Jimmy said quietly.

"Hey, I know! I brought some books with me. How would you like it if I read something to you?"

"Really?" Jimmy asked hopefully.

"Sure. I love to read." Dodger said gently.

"My mama used to read to me at night when I was little." Jimmy said distantly.

"It'll just take me a few minutes to find a book." Dodger said as he stood.

"Thank you, Dodger." Jimmy said with a smile.

"You're welcome; I'm glad to help."

* * * * *

"Dr. Rafe?" Jimmy called out.

"Yes, Jimmy?" Rafe answered, then after a moment to set aside what he was doing, walked across the room.

"I need the toilet." Jimmy admitted, shyly.

"You're not well enough to get out of bed, so I'm afraid you're going to have to use a bedpan." Rafe said hesitantly.

Jimmy thought for a moment, then timidly said, "Just do it before Dodger gets back. I don't want him to see."

"It'll just take a second."

* * * * *

Both Jimmy and Rafe looked up at the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs.

"Dodger, would you please go to the kitchen and get Jimmy a glass of water?" Rafe called out quickly.

"Sure." Dodger called down the stairs, then turned and went back up.

"Are you almost done?" Rafe asked gently.

"It hurts." Jimmy said in a small voice.

"I know, but I promise that it **will** get better."

"Why does my butt hurt? I didn't get bit there, did I?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Not exactly. But how about I get you cleaned up back there before Dodger gets back. And we can talk about it later, if you like." Rafe asked quietly.

Jimmy glanced at the stairs, then nodded his agreement.

* * * * *

It took less than two pages of his book before Jimmy was sound asleep.

"I think you've made a friend." Rafe said as he roamed over from the lab area.

"I had my doubts for a minute, but thanks to Arturo, I think we're okay." Dodger said as he casually wrapped an arm around Rafe.

"Just remember that he has a lot to deal with. The loss of his family, being in a strange place and just the plain old-fashioned frustration of being bed ridden." Rafe said frankly.

"I know that in my head, but my heart still feels it when he lashes out." Dodger said honestly.

"That's one of the reasons that you need to spend some time doing other things." Rafe said gently.

Dodger thought for a moment then nodded as he said, "I can see that now."

"I think Jimmy's probably going to be asleep for a while. Why don't you go on up?" Rafe asked quietly.

"Yeah. And maybe I'll see if Mavis has something for Jimmy to eat in case he gets hungry in-between meals."

"Just make sure that it's soft food. He's going to be tender for a while."

"I'll remember." Dodger said softly, then moved in to give Rafe a kiss.

Rafe responded to the kiss and turned Dodger slightly so he could take him into his arms.

At some unconscious cue, they both pulled out of the kiss at the same time.

"Love you." Dodger whispered.

"Love you back." Rafe said with a grin.

Dodger smiled, then reluctantly pulled away.

Rafe stood there and smiled as he watched Dodger go up the stairs.

* * * * *

"You two about ready to call it a day?" Justus asked as he walked down the stairs.

Dodger sat up suddenly at the sound, and realized that he had been lightly dozing in the chair by Jimmy's bed.

"Yes. I think I have a list of everything that I'm going to need. What are you going to need to know?" Rafe asked seriously.

"Mainly, how heavy and how big your shipment is going to be, that way I can arrange for the best way to get it here." Justus said with his perpetual grin in place.

"It shouldn't be too bad. All the bulky equipment that I might need is already here." Rafe said as he handed Justus a steno pad notebook.

After a moment, Justus said, "This shouldn't be a problem at all. I think I should be able to arrange for it to be delivered to this place about 250 miles from here, then we can just run on down and pick it up."

"That's right around the corner." Dodger said with a grin, as he approached.

"As good as." Justus said with a wide smile.

"I'll need to contact Morgan and see how quickly he can arrange things on his end." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"That shouldn't be a problem." Justus said casually. "Can I take this little guy upstairs? That way I'll be able to keep an eye on him and do my work at the same time."

"As long as you're careful with him, there shouldn't be a problem. He can't walk and he's going to need to use a bedpan when he has to go to the bathroom." Rafe said frankly. "You can come and get me for that if you need to."

"I was in Europe during 'the black death', I think that I'll be able to manage this." Justus said with an amused grin.

Rafe smiled and nodded his agreement.

Justus walked over to Jimmy and very gently picked him up.

Rafe and Dodger followed him up the stairs.

* * * * *

"Alone at last." Dodger said as he held Rafe tight against his chest.

"I hope you're not planning anything very athletic tonight, because, I've got to tell you, I'm totally exhausted." Rafe said regretfully.

"I am too." Dodger said, then moved in to give Rafe a deep kiss.

"Mmmm... that's nice." Rafe said against Dodger's lips.

"It only gets better." Dodger said, as he started to undo the buttons of Rafe's shirt.

Chapter 12

Dodger awoke to the most wonderful feeling of contentment. He was naked under the warm, comfy quilt and cuddled against Rafe's side.

The scent of Rafe filled him with a feeling of safety and security as well as an electric tingle of passion.

But, regretfully, Dodger had another pressing matter that was going to become urgent in a short time.

So he carefully got out of the bed and pulled on some clothes before hurrying out of the room and to the bathroom.

* * * * *

As Dodger walked into the kitchen, he found that Mavis was already up and cooking.

"Good morning, Mavis. Can I help you with anything?" Dodger asked as he walked to the refrigerator.

"Good morning, Dodger. Thanks for the offer, but the beans are already going. All I'm doing now is making up a plate for the boy." Mavis said pleasantly.

"Thanks for doing that." Dodger said as he picked up the silver pitcher, then asked, "Would you mind?"

She glanced at him, then shook her head as she said, "Go ahead. The boys will be bringing up some fresh to go with dinner."

Dodger poured himself a glass of blood, then on impulse, poured a second one.

"Justus said that the boy slept most of the day. So I'm figurin' that he'll probably be hungry once he get's good and awake." Mavis said casually.

"Yeah. That sounds about right." Dodger said thoughtfully, then absently added, "He's a really sweet kid."

"I never had much use for kids, myself." She said as she peeled a carrot. "Whining, crying little snot factories."

Dodger chuckled, then said, "Yeah. Some are that way. But I think Jimmy's parents must have been really good people, because even though he has all kinds of reasons to be raising a fuss, he's holding up really well."

Mavis nodded, then quietly admitted, "Probably better than I did."

"Maybe. But he doesn't remember what happened to him." Dodger said frankly, then quietly added, "And, in a way, I hope he never does."

Mavis absently nodded as she continued to clean vegetables.

"I'm going to take this in to Rafe. Are we going to have a few minutes before breakfast?" Dodger asked curiously.

"I figure 'bout a half hour or so." Mavis said thoughtfully.

Dodger smiled and said, "That sounds perfect."

Mavis glanced at him, then chuckled as she said, "Go give your doctor a 'good morning'."

Dodger paused in the doorway long enough to say, "I intend to."

* * * * *

Slowly, Dodger crept into the room, careful not to make a sound.

He placed the two glasses on the bedside stand, then skinned out of his clothes and climbed between the sheets.

"Good morning." Rafe said in a muffled voice into his pillow.

"I hope so." Dodger said as he spooned against Rafe's back and began to nuzzle his neck.

"Mmmm... what did you have in mind?" Rafe asked in a purring voice.

"Oh, I've got all kinds of things in mind." Dodger whispered, then began to worry Rafe's ear lobe with his teeth.

"You've got my attention." Rafe said in a breathy whisper that conveyed his rising passion.

Dodger slowly reached around and encountered some very hot, very firm flesh before saying, "It seems like I do."

"Why did I spend all those years alone when I could have been waking up like this every morning?" Rafe asked distantly.

"You were waiting for me." Dodger said playfully.

"Yes. I was." Rafe said dreamily, then turned so that he could face Dodger.

"What would you like, Rafe?" Dodger asked with a sultry tone in his voice.

"I want to, but we should probably go..." Rafe began to say.

"Jimmy's sleeping, Mavis said that breakfast won't be for at least half an hour and I brought you some blood." Dodger said seriously.

Rafe broke into a big smile, then said, "I get the feeling that you want me."

"I've got you, and if you don't hurry up and tell me what you want to do, I'm just going to have to go ahead and take what I want." Dodger said frankly.

Rafe considered for a moment, then broke into a wide smile as he whispered, "Do it."

* * * * *

"Good morning Justus, how are things going with our young friend?" Rafe asked in a contented voice as he walked into the living room where Jimmy was lying, asleep on the couch.

"No problems to speak of. He woke up a few times during the day and we talked. He's a nice kid." Justus said with a fond look at Jimmy.

"I'm glad he didn't have any problems." Rafe said with relief.

"Do you think it'd be alright to leave him in here alone while we have breakfast?" Justus asked carefully, "We should be able to hear him just fine from the kitchen if he wakes up and needs anything."

"I don't see any problem with that." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"Then I'll see you in there." Justus said with his ever present smile firmly in place.

Rafe nodded, then turned to Dodger and said, "I have some growth cultures that I need to check on downstairs. It could take a few minutes, so don't wait for me."

Dodger gently grabbed hold of his arm to stop him.

"I love you, Dr. Killian." Dodger said as he turned Rafe to face him.

"And I love you, Mr. Tribodeaux." Rafe said before moving in for a gentle kiss.

"I was wondering if you two were up, but..." Bruce trailed off, then shook his head as he walked past them.

Rafe chuckled at Bruce's reaction, then quietly said, "I'm going to check on my cultures."

"I'll see if there's anything I can do to help Mavis." Dodger said absently, then watched until Rafe was completely out of sight.

* * * * *

"Oh my! It looks like someone is having a very good morning!" Mavis said as Dodger walked into the room.

"The best." Dodger said happily, seeing no reason that he should deny it. "Is there anything I can do to help you with breakfast?"

"Just sit down and get ready to eat it." Mavis said frankly.

"I can do that." Dodger said as he took his seat, then looked at Bruce with question.

Bruce tried to hide his smile in his coffee cup.

"Do you want some coffee, Dodger?" Mavis asked curiously.

"You know, I've never really liked coffee, but for some reason, I think today I would like some." Dodger said as he got up to help himself.

* * * * *

Sam walked into the kitchen and directly to the coffee pot.

"Good morning." Mavis said cheerily.

"Ungh." Sam grunted.

Mavis hauled off and cuffed him on the side of the head.

Sam stared at her with surprise at the bold action.

"I said, 'Good Morning'." Mavis said to him firmly.

"Oh, um. Good morning, sweet thing." Sam said slowly, then leaned in cautiously to give her a quick kiss.

"That's much better." Mavis said lovingly.

Sam gave her a single nod, then took his coffee and walked to the table.

* * * * *

As the three men sipped on their cups of coffee, the others made their way into the kitchen.

Justus joined Dodger, Sam and Bruce at the table while the others seemed to be choosing to stand around the periphery of the room.

"Dodger, do you think I could borrow you for a while, right after we eat?" Bruce asked casually.

"Jimmy was asleep the last time I checked, so I'm sure Rafe doesn't need me for anything. What can I do to help?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Well, I was hoping you could work with Chet to get the horses ready while the rest of us get ready to move the cattle to the South pasture." Bruce said frankly. "If we keep after it, we should be able to get finished before we lose the light."

"Sure. As long as Chet's there to tell me who get's what, I'll be happy to help." Dodger agreed immediately.

"Laramie, did you check the horses out?" Bruce asked firmly as he looked at Laramie, who was standing by the door.

"There's a few that will need worked on, soon. But they'll do fine for today." Laramie said seriously.

"Justus, you up to a cattle drive?" Bruce asked hopefully.

"Like I'd miss it." Justus said with a chuckle.

"Dodger, you'd be welcome to come along with us, if you want. I doubt that there'll be much for you to do, but it's somethin' to see." Bruce said with a grin.

"Yeah. I'll make sure Rafe can spare me, but I should be able to ride along." Dodger said happily.

"Now, if y'all's done jawin'." Mavis said with an exaggerated accent, then smiled and announced, "Food's ready."

At that announcement, everyone made their way to the table.

* * * * *

"I know how to saddle a horse, but... I'm not sure how much help I'm going to be." Dodger said honestly as he followed Chet to the stable.

"Don't worry about it." Chet said casually. "Just stick with me and I'm sure we'll figure out how to work together."

Dodger smiled and nodded his agreement.

"Did you really change two days ago?" Chet asked curiously as he started gathering the tack they would need.

"Yeah. When Rafe found out about what was going on here, we talked. We decided that I could either stay in Ohio without him, or take the chance and change, so I could come with him." Dodger said distantly, then accepted an armful of tack from Chet.

"So you **chose** this life." Chet said with a shake of his head in wonder, then gestured toward the tack room door, indicating that they were going.

"Yeah. Well, actually, I chose to do whatever I had to so I could stay with Rafe." Dodger said shyly.

"I've never found a love like that." Chet said wistfully.

"I get the feeling that it's rare." Dodger said frankly.

Chet chuckled at the understatement, then nodded.

They worked silently for a few minutes. Mostly Dodger just handed things to Chet as he was ready for them.

Finally, when the silence was becoming uncomfortable, Dodger said, "I've heard that you're the oldest person here."

Chet stopped what he was doing for a moment, then glanced at Dodger with surprise.

"I kind of thought that the oldest would be... I don't know, running things, or something. I mean, since you have all that wisdom." Dodger rambled.

Chet actually laughed at the statement.

Dodger smiled with relief that Chet wasn't offended by his words.

"Well, first of all, I don't want to be in charge. If I'm wise at all, I guess I'm wise enough to know that I don't want to worry about all the little things." Chet said frankly. "Sam and Bruce are good at stuff like that. So I work out here with the horses and help out wherever Sam needs me."

Dodger nodded that he could really understand that.

"I'm happy. If I've learned anything in..." He chuckled, then shyly continued, "...seventeen centuries, it's this. Find what makes you happy, then find a way to make that a part of every day. If you can do that, you'll love your life as much as I love mine."

"I think I've already found it... well, him." Dodger said timidly.

Chet considered for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I think you might have."

* * * * *

The slowly darkening sky was clear and beautiful and the sight of everyone riding their horses, driving the cattle where they needed to be, was awe inspiring.

Dodger felt bad that he couldn't be more help to them, but at the same time, he felt a part of what they were doing, riding across miles upon miles of pasture to herd the cattle to their new grazing area.

As night firmly took hold, Dodger was filled with wonder at the expansive and infinite sky above them. It seemed to be too big to be real.

Once the last of the cattle had been driven to their new field, Bruce rode up to Dodger's side and fell into a casual pace as they made their way back to the ranch.

"You looked like you were having a good time out there." Bruce said quietly as he turned on a flashlight to lead their way.

Dodger chuckled, then said, "There were a few times that it was all I could do to keep up with you. I don't know what I would have done if you'd been counting on me to actually help in some way."

"I'm sure that after a few more times, you'll be used to it enough that you'll be able to help out. Just like anything else, it takes practice." Bruce said frankly.

"I guess you would know." Dodger said with a smile, then quietly asked, "How did you end up coming here, anyway?"

"I was working on a ranch down in Texas, a big spread South of Amarillo when one night I saw this guy out in one of our pastures. I couldn't think of what he might be doing out there." Bruce said distantly, "When I went to check on him, I saw that he was feeding on one of our steers. Of course, I didn't know anything about that at the time. Well, when he finally noticed me, he jumped on me, and was trying to drain me."

"And I'm guessing he got a bite of you." Dodger said quietly.

"Yeah. He got me good." Bruce said regretfully. "He must've been really weak because I was able to take him down. Somehow I was able to make it back to the bunkhouse, but I don't remember too much after that."

"I'm surprised that you didn't bleed to death." Dodger said quietly.

"I think I just about did. I really can't remember a whole lot." Bruce said distantly. "I figure one of the other fellas in the bunkhouse must've called the ranch owner, because the next thing I know, there he is, standing right by my bed. Well, looking back on it now, I figure that he had to have known about people like us. But back then, I just knew that he was worried about something and had a couple of the farm hands tie me up and put me in the back of a pickup under a tarp. The next thing I knew, they were driving like the hounds of hell were after us."

"I bet you were scared." Dodger whispered.

"You don't know the half of it. I didn't know if I was sick, going insane or turning into some kind of monster." Bruce chuckled weakly.

"So you went through your change in the back of a pickup truck under a tarp?" Dodger asked in wonder.

"Yeah. And I was about 90% sure that the guys were taking me out to the middle of nowhere to kill me and dump my body." Bruce said frankly.

"But they were bringing you here?" Dodger asked speculatively.

"That's right. And by the time we got here, I would probably have attacked any of them if I hadn't been tied up." Bruce said regretfully.

"I bet you were starving." Dodger said softly.

"I've never been so hungry in my life. I couldn't think of anything past satisfying my hunger." Bruce said frankly. "But when we got here, Sam was waiting for me with a big mug of blood."

"So your old boss must have called Sam and asked him what he could do for you." Dodger said speculatively.

"Yeah. I talked to Sam about it later on and he said that him and Justus and Chet ran into my boss a few years back. Saved his life." Bruce said with a lopsided grin, then added, "I guess they kept in touch."

Dodger slowly nodded as he thought about Little Joe and wondered how he was doing.

"I never could have imagined back then that less than a year later I'd be night foreman of this place." Bruce said distantly.

"It just proves that you know what you're doing." Dodger said with a smile.

"Yeah, I guess so. But Arturo knows at least as much as I do." Bruce said seriously.

"He does?" Dodger asked with surprise.

"Oh yeah. He's been ranching about twice as long as I have and knows all kinds of things." Bruce said frankly, then huffed a sigh and continued, "But there's no way he could do my job, because he's not a leader."

"Yeah. I guess knowing the job is only part of it. You've also got to be able to organize the work and get the others to do the things that they need to do." Dodger said speculatively.

"That's right. Arturo is one hell of a good worker, but I don't think he could handle being in charge." Bruce said distantly.

"I don't know about that." Dodger said as he glanced at the night sky again. "It's like you said before, 'Just like anything else, it takes practice'."

Bruce considered the words and finally nodded.

* * * * *

When they arrived back at the house, Dodger immediately went to the living room to see how Jimmy was doing.

The living room was empty, so he went downstairs and found Jimmy sitting up in bed and talking with Rafe.

"How are you guys doing?" Dodger asked with a smile.

"I think we're doing okay. I just finished checking out Jimmy's injuries and he seems to be healing nicely." Rafe said with a tender smile at the boy.

"Hey! That's great news!" Dodger said happily, then thought to ask, "Are you hungry yet, Jimmy?"

It seemed that Jimmy was surprised by the question. Dodger could tell by the expressions that flitted across Jimmy's face that, now that Dodger had brought it to his attention, he actually was hungry.

Dodger couldn't restrain a smile as Jimmy timidly nodded.

"I'll get you something good. I'll be right back." Dodger said as he walked toward the stairs.

"Thank you!" Jimmy called after him.

Dodger smiled at the boy's thoughtfulness and replied, "You're welcome."

* * * * *

After retrieving a plate of food that Mavis had left warming in the oven, Dodger returned to the basement and gave Jimmy his breakfast.

While Jimmy ate, Dodger told him, in great detail, about riding along with the others on the cattle drive.

When Dodger had finally run out of story to tell, Jimmy timidly asked, "Do you think I'd be allowed to go riding with you?"

Dodger smiled at the question and gently said, "You're not well enough to go riding, now. But, I promise that just as soon as Rafe says that you're well enough, you and I will go riding together."

Jimmy gave Dodger a beaming smile at the answer.

* * * * *

It turned out that Jimmy was able to stay awake longer after having eaten.

As they sat and watched Rafe working in the small lab area, Jimmy quietly asked, "Why is Dr. Rafe taking my blood so much and doing so many tests? Am I sick?"

Dodger glanced at Rafe and thought about asking him to come over and answer Jimmy's question, but instead, he steeled himself to do what might end up being impossible and skate on the very edge of the truth without telling Jimmy an outright lie.

"The men who attacked you and your family, they had a disease that, well I guess in a way it's something like rabies." Dodger said carefully.

"I have rabies?" Jimmy asked with sudden panic.

"No. No. You don't have rabies. In fact, you don't even have the disease that those men had. And that's why Dr. Rafe is taking so many blood samples." Dodger said carefully.

Jimmy looked at Dodger with confusion.

"For some reason, you're immune." Dodger said carefully. "If Dr. Rafe can figure out why you're immune, then maybe he can make a vaccine to help other people who get bit so they won't get sick either."

Jimmy sat quietly for a while, considering what he had been told. Finally he asked, "Did my mama and daddy get sick?"

"I don't know, Jimmy." Dodger said honestly.

Jimmy thought a while longer, then quietly said, "Dr. Rafe is gonna make it so if someone gets sick, that he can make them better."

"That's what we're hoping." Dodger said gently.

Jimmy sat quietly for a while, then Dodger noticed that his eyes seemed to be getting heavy.

"Why don't you lay down and get some rest?" Dodger asked gently.

Jimmy nodded his agreement.

As Dodger leaned over Jimmy to move the pile of pillows from behind him, he felt a small pair of cautious arms encircle him.

Dodger smiled and gently returned the hug as he whispered, "You're going to be fine, Jimmy. You're in a safe place, with lots of people to take care of you."

Jimmy didn't respond, he just held on a little longer, then finally released the hug.

Dodger helped Jimmy to lie back on the bed as he said, "Sleep now and we'll talk some more later."

Jimmy slightly nodded, and there was a trace of a smile on his face.

Dodger couldn't resist the sight and leaned down and gave the boy a quick, gentle kiss on the cheek before saying, "Sweet dreams."

Jimmy's smile was slightly bigger as he nodded that he would.

* * * * *

"Hola, Dodger. Is there something I can do to help you?" Arturo asked as he looked up from the discs of the tiller he was working on.

"Yeah. I was wondering if maybe you could teach me some Spanish." Dodger asked hesitantly.

"Sure. Just tell me what you want to say and I'll tell you how to say it." Arturo said happily.

"You see, I don't really know what I want to say. I just thought, maybe if I could learn a few phrases that it might make Jimmy feel a little bit more comfortable here." Dodger said quietly.

"Yeah. I really know how he feels." Arturo said somewhat distantly. "Being the only Mexican on the ranch, sometimes I feel different. No one treats me that way, but I still feel it, just the same."

"Bruce was saying some really nice things about you earlier. I think he really respects you." Dodger said quietly.

Arturo looked at Dodger with surprise, then hesitantly asked, "You was talking about me?"

"No." Dodger said quickly, then amended, "Well, yes. But we weren't talking **just** about you. We were talking about how Bruce came to the ranch and got his job here and you got mentioned along the way."

Arturo nodded that he understood, then absently said, "When Sam and Justus realized how much work it was going to be to take care of this place, Sam got in touch with me and I came up to work for him. I've known Sam since before all of this was part of the United States."

"Wow." Dodger said with surprise.

"Oh. That's right. You just changed a few days ago." Arturo said with a chuckle.

"Yeah. It's a lot to get used to." Dodger said shyly.

"You're doing fine." Arturo said with a smile, then added, "If you'll grab a wire brush and help me, I can teach you some Spanish while we work."

"Thanks." Dodger said happily.

* * * * *

When Dodger went back into the house, he hurried down to the basement so he could try out some of the new Spanish phrases he had learned, on Jimmy.

When he got to the bottom of the stairs, he found that Jimmy was still asleep and Mavis was standing over him, with a tender expression in her eyes.

"How's he doing?" Dodger asked as he approached.

"I just came down to see if he was hungry for anything else." Mavis said as her gaze held firmly to the boy. "He's so small."

"I know." Dodger whispered as he followed her gaze to watch Jimmy sleeping.

"I think I'm going to make something nice for him for dinner." Mavis said decisively, as she finally looked away from the boy.

"I think he'd really appreciate that." Dodger said gently.

Mavis gave him a quick smile before going back upstairs.

* * * * *

"So, how's it going, over here?" Dodger asked as he walked up to Rafe.

"It isn't." Rafe said frankly.

Dodger stopped with surprise at the statement.

Rafe turned to face him and said, "I've done about as much as I can with the equipment that I have here. So far, none of my tests have given any favorable results."

"Don't worry. I'm sure that when the stuff you ordered gets here that you'll have more luck." Dodger said gently.

"I hope so." Rafe said quietly. "It's just so disappointing. I didn't think I'd walk in here and find a cure right away, but I really expected to have at least a slow growth pattern, by now."

Dodger stepped forward and pulled Rafe into his arms as he said, "You'll find it, I know you will."

"Thanks, Dodger." Rafe whispered, "With your encouragement, I'm sure I'll figure it out."

* * * * *

"Hey Bruce, what have you got for me to do?" Dodger asked as he walked to the side of the barn.

After a moment of thought, Bruce walked over to a large crate that was serving as a makeshift toolbox and took out a pair of gloves and wire cutters.

"Scott and Eloy are out shoring up the fences in the North pasture. If you follow the fence out that way, you'll find them. I'm sure they'd appreciate another pair of hands." Bruce said, then handed him a roll of bailing wire.

"Thanks." Dodger said happily.

It was the first time that Bruce had given him a 'real' job to do.

"Do you want me to take a horse?" Dodger asked hesitantly, hoping it wasn't a stupid question.

"At this time of night, it's easier to go on foot. A horse will just hold you back." Bruce said frankly.

Dodger was all smiles as he walked past the barn to start following the fence.

* * * * *

The walk out to find Scott and Eloy was just what Dodger needed.

All alone, walking in the tranquil night, Dodger felt a sense of peace like he had never known before.

When he finally happened upon the pair, they were hard at work.

"Hey guys. Bruce sent me out to help, if there's anything I can do." Dodger said cautiously, not entirely sure of his welcome.

"Yeah. Oh good, you've got some more wire. Come on over here." Eloy said happily.

Dodger walked up beside them and offered them the wire.

"If you two will pull that one up, I'm going to get this bastard fastened down once and for all." Eloy said passionately.

At Dodger's look of surprise, Scott explained, "We've been struggling with this cursed thing for about half an hour."

"Shift it." Eloy said firmly.

Dodger got on one side as Scott got on the other and forced the fence wire into place where Eloy needed it.

"That's it. Just hold it there." Eloy said in concentration as he bound the wire in place.

Finally he said, "Good, you can let it go, now."

Dodger and Scott released the fence wire cautiously and were both relieved when it held its place.

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They walked at a casual pace as they followed the fence, looking for other places where it needed to be reinforced.

"You guys have been together for a while, right?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Hundred years, give or take." Eloy said casually.

"More like a hundred and fifty." Scott said frankly.

Eloy looked at him with surprise, then got a considering look on his face.

"Yeah. I guess it has been. The time just flies when you're having fun." Eloy finally said as he gave Scott a big grin.

Dodger chuckled at the expression, then hesitantly said, "Rafe and I have only been together for two days, I mean, as husbands. And I was wondering, I mean, I've never been with anyone else and I thought maybe you'd know some different things..."

"Dodger, you've come to the right people." Eloy said happily.

"Yeah, as long as you ain't shy about hearin' it, we got a whole lot to teach you." Scott said seriously.

Dodger nodded quickly and paid them his full attention.

* * * * *

As Scott and Eloy began describing a few of their favorite things, Dodger became aroused. He tried, in vain, to hide it from them, but when Eloy noticed, he just gave Dodger an easy-going smile and said, "Dodger, we're all guys. There's no need to be shy about it because the same could happen to any of us."

Even though Dodger was embarrassed, he went ahead and reached into his pants to adjust himself which brought him great relief.

"I'm guessing that you wouldn't feel like doing anything about that without your doctor." Eloy said frankly.

Dodger looked at Eloy with surprise and a bit of fear.

"C'mon Eloy, Dodger's just changed. You know how the day people are. I'm betting that he's planning on it being just him and his doctor 'til death us do part'." Scott said with a sideways look at his husband.

"Oh, yeah." Eloy said quietly, then looked at Dodger and said, "Forget I asked."

"No, please. What do you mean 'how day people are'?" Dodger asked curiously.

Eloy looked around at where they were, then said, "We'd better be heading back. We can talk on the way."

Dodger nodded and fell into step along with the pair.

"Day people live sixty or so years. So I guess it kinda makes sense that if they find someone to love, they hang on tight and not take any chances." Eloy said thoughtfully.

"But shadesiders do it differently?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Not all of us. Some, like Sam and Mavis, they do like that and it's just the two of them." Scott interjected.

"But others of us, we enjoy having a good time with more than two." Eloy added frankly.

"I thought you two were husbands." Dodger said slowly.

"We are. I love Scott first and most." Eloy said firmly. "But sometimes it's fun for us to have another person or another couple join us."

"Isn't that... I mean, what happens if you do that and one of you falls in love with someone else." Dodger asked with concern.

"I trust our love." Eloy said seriously.

"And if one of us were to fall in love with someone else, then was our love ever real to begin with?" Scott added quietly.

"So it's normal for a shadesider couple to have sex with other people?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Not all the time, but now and then it's nice to do something different." Scott said gently.

Dodger nodded, then cautiously asked, "So before, were you asking if I wanted to have sex with you?"

"Well, yeah. I just thought that since you were in the mood..." Eloy drifted off with a shrug.

"I don't think I could do that." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"Maybe not now, but after fifty, sixty, a hundred years... you might feel a little different." Eloy said simply.

"You should probably talk to your husband about this. He might be old fashioned and not want to consider ever doing anything more." Scott added seriously.

"Yeah. I think I will. I mean, I'm really not interested in doing anything like that now, but I'd like to know how he feels about it." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"That sounds like a smart way to go." Scott said with an approving smile.

"So, if you two sometimes do it with other people, does that mean..." Dodger trailed off, not wanting to voice his question.

"Are you asking if we have sex with the other guys?" Eloy asked with a grin.

"I probably shouldn't ask." Dodger mumbled as he faced away.

"It's okay. I'm sure everyone on the ranch knows anyway." Eloy said casually. "Chet will bunk in with us about once every week or so. It isn't really even about sex with him, I think he enjoys being included and feeling loved."

"Do you love him?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Sure." Scott said immediately, then amended, "Not like a husband, but like a very close, very dear friend. I hope that someday he'll find someone to be his soul-mate, like Eloy is for me. But until that time, we'll be happy to hold him at night and share our love with him."

"It's different with Bruce. I mean, we enjoy it when he joins us, and he's really appreciative. But, I don't know, it's just different." Eloy said with difficulty.

"Bruce is more detached." Scott said thoughtfully. "He's funny and pleasant and all that, but there's not the same emotional connection that we have with Chet. It's like Bruce is there, but he's not really there. He's going through the motions, but he's not emotionally invested in it."

"So it's just fun." Dodger said slowly.

"Yeah." Scott said with a smile.

"We love Chet. We like Bruce." Eloy said with a nod.

After long, silent minutes of walking, Dodger finally said, "Thanks for sharing all that with me, guys. It sounded really weird to me at first, but now... well, maybe someday Rafe and I will find someone we love... or like."

"I hope so Dodger." Scott said honestly. "It can be like another expression of your love for each other."

* * * * *

"We've still got a few minutes before dinner. Would you like to see the bunkhouse?" Scott asked as he put his tools away in the barn.

"Sure. I'd like to see where you guys live." Dodger said with a smile.

"It's over this way." Eloy said as he led the way.

Dodger followed along and noticed the hum of an engine in the distance as they walked.

"What's that sound?" Dodger asked as he looked around.

"The generator." Scott said simply. "Sam started it up before you all arrived. He thought the doctor would need electricity to do his work."

"Do you usually live without electricity?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Sure. All we need is an oil lamp for reading or for when Eloy is working on one of his paintings." Scott said, then gestured toward the building they were approaching. "Home sweet home."

* * * * *

"It's just one big room?" Dodger asked as he looked around at the collection of beds and the large sturdy table surrounded by chairs.

"Well, there's a privy through the door over there, but yeah. This is all of it." Scott said with a smile at Dodger's reaction.

"So you don't have your own rooms?" Dodger asked in confirmation.

"What for?" Eloy asked as he led the way through the large room.

"Privacy?" Dodger said hesitantly.

Scott smiled as Eloy chuckled softly.

"I suppose that if you were raised with privacy, you might worry about it. But we weren't." Scott said warmly.

"Yeah. As long as we don't get too loud, the others don't care about what we're doing." Eloy said with a smile, then indicated a large bed with a heavy quilt on it.

"In fact, there's been quite a few times when we've been making love and I've noticed that Laramie and Arturo were in their own beds watching us and taking care of themselves." Scott said as he sat down on the edge of his bed.

"So Laramie and Arturo don't join you?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Arturo has, a few times, but I get the feeling that he wasn't really comfortable with it." Scott said thoughtfully. "I'm guessing that if Arturo found someone to fall in love with, that he's the type that wouldn't want to fool around with anyone else."

"What about Justus?" Dodger asked as he watched Scott take off his boots.

"He's never joined us." Eloy said immediately.

"Him and Sam are really close, so it's possible that they might do something. But I don't really know for sure." Scott said absently as he pulled on another pair of boots.

Dodger nodded, then noticed the picture that was above their bed.

"Hey! That's beautiful." Dodger said as he stepped closer to look at the shadowy landscape.

"Eloy did that. He's good, isn't he?" Scott asked with a look of pride at his husband.

"It's so different from anything I've seen before... I love it." Dodger said as he looked closely at the picture.

"If you wanted, I have some other paintings that I could show you when we have more time." Eloy said, a bit shyly.

"Yeah. That would be great!" Dodger said hopefully.

"But right now, we need to go." Scott said seriously, then asked Dodger, "Are you ready for dinner?"

"Sure." Dodger said with a smile as he followed the pair out of the bunkhouse.

* * * * *

As soon as they were back in the main house, Dodger went immediately downstairs to see how Rafe and Jimmy were doing.

He was surprised to find Jimmy awake and alert.

"Hola! Como estas?" Dodger asked Jimmy with a grin.

After a moment for the shock to wear off, Jimmy responded, "Bien! Y tu?"

"Muy bien." Dodger said with a smile, then added, "And that's about as much as I can remember from what Arturo was able to teach me today."

"Why do you want to learn Spanish?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Well, mainly because I have a new friend who speaks Spanish and I want for him to feel at home and comfortable around me." Dodger said with a tender smile.

"Thank you, Dodger. That was nice." Jimmy said shyly.

"If you wanted to, maybe you could teach me some more?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"Yeah. I'd like that." Jimmy said with a tired smile.

"How about, right now, I read you some more of the book, so you can get to sleep?" Dodger asked gently. "Then tomorrow when we're both well rested, we can start on the language lessons."

Jimmy happily nodded and watched as Dodger picked up the book on the stand beside his bed.

As Dodger began to read, Jimmy snuggled down into the bed and closed his eyes.

* * * * *

After a delicious dinner of Johnny Cakes, scrambled eggs and fried potatoes, Dodger led Rafe to their bedroom.

"You were gone for quite a while tonight. What were you up to?" Rafe asked curiously as he walked into the room.

"Bruce asked me to go out and help Scott and Eloy on the fences." Dodger said as he pulled Rafe into his arms. "It was fun."

"Scott and Eloy... they're the couple, right?" Rafe asked thoughtfully.

"Yeah. They're husbands." Dodger said as he guided Rafe to sit on the bed, then gently brushed his hands away as he said, "Let me get that for you."

Rafe didn't resist as Dodger began to slowly unbutton his shirt.

"While I was working with Scott and Eloy, they told me some things that I wanted to ask you about." Dodger said quietly and Rafe noticed a certain timidity in Dodger's expression.

"Go ahead. You can ask me anything." Rafe said assuringly as he felt Dodger pulling his shirttails free.

"It's not that I'm saying I want to do it, but I'd really like to know how you feel before I think about it too much." Dodger said nervously as he guided Rafe's shirt off his shoulders and down his arms.

"I'll keep that in mind." Rafe said gently, then added, "What are we talking about?"

"Well, Scott and Eloy said that sometimes they have another person or another couple sleep with them." Dodger said frankly, then stopped all movement as he looked deeply into Rafe's eyes to await his reaction.

After a moment of consideration, Rafe seemed to come back to himself and looked into Dodger's eyes with a smile.

"In theory, I have no problem with that at all. If it's something that makes them happy, then I'm happy for them. But as far as it applies to us... I can't even imagine doing that." Rafe said honestly.

Dodger's smile was luminous as he said, "I couldn't put it into words, but that's **exactly** how I feel about it, too."

Rafe leaned forward and pulled Dodger down slightly to give him a slow, lingering kiss.

As the kiss broke, Dodger pulled back and had hold of Rafe's undershirt, pulling it up his sides.

Rafe automatically lifted his arms and allowed Dodger to skin the undershirt off over his head.

"Scott and Eloy told me some other things, too." Dodger said in a low, sultry voice.

"What kind of things?" Rafe asked in a leading tone, obviously playing along.

"Everything is just so new to me. Being a shadesider, being in love, being in love with a man, being part of a couple." Dodger said shyly. "I just asked them for a little bit of advice, you know, about the things I don't know or that we haven't tried yet, or haven't even thought about."

"Did they tell you anything that sounded good?" Rafe asked gently.

"Yeah." Dodger said timidly, then dropped to the floor beside the bed and started taking off Rafe's shoes.

"Is there anything you'd like to try?" Rafe asked carefully, sensing that Dodger needed a little prompting.

"Maybe. If you wanted to." Dodger said nervously, directing his answer to Rafe's feet.

"Please, just tell me." Rafe said gently.

After a moment of hesitation, Dodger looked up into Rafe's eyes and quietly said, "Well, they told me lots of things. But one of the things that they told me was that if, while we're making love, that we could bite each other just a little bit, and that it would be like... a whole other level."

"Yes. I've heard about that." Rafe said quietly as he held Dodger's gaze.

"So you've never done it?" Dodger asked with a little surprise.

"No. It's the sort of thing that can be very profound and you only do it with someone whom you love deeply. I never had that before I met you." Rafe said honestly.

"So... do you want to?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"Yes. I want to, very much." Rafe said as he looked lovingly into Dodger's eyes.

Dodger leaned forward and started to nervously unfasten Rafe's belt.

"Why don't you let me take care of this, while you get undressed." Rafe asked quietly as he put his hands over Dodger's to stop his fumbling.

"I want to take care of you. There's not very much I can do to show you how much I love you. Please, let me do this." Dodger asked hopefully.

"I understand." Rafe said gently as he withdrew his hands and rested back to allow Dodger to undress him.

Rafe marveled at how Dodger seemed so intent on making every movement, every moment, a significant act in their lovemaking.

It astounded him that, in six centuries of existence, he had never encountered a love like this before.

He had thought he had known, intellectually, what love would be like. He hadn't a clue. The reality was so far removed from that vague idea that it was laughable.

"Lift up." Dodger said gently as he began to tug on Rafe's pants.

Rafe lifted slightly and watched the delight fill Dodger's eyes as he examined the newly exposed flesh before him.

To be so cherished, so treasured... it was intoxicating.

* * * * *

As Dodger pulled down the underwear, Rafe lifted automatically to accommodate him.

When Rafe's erection came into full view, it was all Dodger could do not to claim it immediately.

But due to their circumstances, working at the ranch and having to spend so much time either apart, or in the company of others, their time together was far too valuable to indulge in fleeting, momentary pleasures.

Dodger was determined to make Rafe feel loved, not just his cock, but all of him. Brain and body, heart and soul. And at the culmination of their lovemaking, they would share this thing that was new to both of them. They would share their blood and, if Scott and Eloy were right, they would achieve a deeper, more fulfilling level in their relationship.

As Dodger pulled the underwear off over Rafe's feet, he couldn't help but pause a moment to appreciate the beauty of his husband.

He could tell by the look in Rafe's eyes, that he understood exactly what was going through Dodger's mind and was lying back and allowing him to drink in his fill of the sight.

Dodger began to undress, as he kept his gaze on Rafe's beautifully toned, perfectly sculpted, naked body.

"Do you want me to do..." Rafe asked in a whisper that trailed off as Dodger shook his head.

The act of undressing Rafe had been a part of his lovemaking, he didn't expect, or even want for it to be reciprocated. It was his expression of love for his husband, and he had no doubt that Rafe would find his own way to express himself that would be his and his alone.

Dodger stopped, standing over Rafe who was resting back on his elbows.

"I love you so much." Dodger whispered.

Rafe sat up and wordlessly pulled Dodger to him.

There was a long, perfect moment as Rafe rested his head against Dodger's belly and just held him.

There was nothing sexual in the action, no exact words or sentiments were being conveyed, but the moment represented an expression of pure love.

Dodger slowly and gently let his hands come to rest on the top of Rafe's head and held him, accepting what Rafe was freely giving.

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Rafe looked up into Dodger's eyes and could see an echo of his own love reflected back at him.

Dodger slowly moved in and gave Rafe a slow, lingering kiss.

It was the kiss of a loved one, not a lover.

When Dodger finally backed out of the kiss, he put a hand on Rafe's shoulder and gently guided him to scoot further onto the bed, where they would be more comfortable.

Once Rafe was resting with his head on a pillow, Dodger slowly climbed on top of him.

The action caused Rafe to remember their first time together, when Dodger was a timid teenage boy, uncertain of what he should do.

Now, only a scant few days later, here was his husband in the same physical position. But this time Dodger knew what he wanted and was more confident in his actions.

Dodger's naivete and sweet innocence had held it's own attraction for Rafe, but having his husband here, wanting him, being the strong one and make him feel safe and loved... he couldn't have imagined that their relationship would turn out to be this perfect.

If Rafe had paused to speculate, he would have guessed that Dodger would expect him to always initiate things and direct their actions. But that very day, Dodger had awakened him in the most loving way and, basically, ravished him. Being with Dodger was better than his best dream.

"Hold me." Dodger whispered as he nuzzled Rafe's ear.

Immediately, Rafe put his arms around Dodger and held him gently as he felt the other side of the scales come into balance. Dodger not only loved him, but wanted to be loved by him. He wanted to be admired and cherished, and best of all, he wasn't afraid to ask for it.

Rafe turned his head slightly and started nibbling at Dodger's earlobe.

"Mmmm..." Dodger purred, deep in his chest.

"You're so beautiful." Rafe said in a dreamy whisper, his breath teasing Dodger's ear. "You're everything I ever wanted in a husband and everything I never knew that I wanted."

Before Rafe could say more, Dodger captured his mouth in a forceful kiss.

There was more that Rafe wanted to say, but he didn't know if he could find adequate words to convey his meaning. So he contented himself with expressing his feelings through his actions.

"Make love to me." Dodger whispered against Rafe's lips.

"Forever." Rafe responded, even as he was reaching blindly to the nightstand for the lubrication that they always kept handy.

"Let me." Dodger said as he gently took the lube from Rafe's hand.

"Just tell me where you want me." Rafe said as he looked up lazily at Dodger's lust filled eyes.

"I want you right where I've got you." Dodger said as he held Rafe's gaze.

After a moment, Dodger sat the tube of lube aside, then went up on his knees, straddling Rafe.

"Do you want me to stretch you?" Rafe asked with concern as he realized what Dodger was doing.

"No. Just relax and enjoy the ride." Dodger said as he carefully placed Rafe's erection right where he wanted it. "I'm in control, so you don't need to worry about hurting me."

Rafe was uncertain, but finally concluded that Dodger was right. In this position, Dodger could take all the time he needed.

* * * * *

"Yessss!" Rafe hissed when Dodger finally completed the slow process of adjusting to Rafe's girth and Rafe felt the heat engulf him.

"I'm glad you like that, because it only gets better from here." Dodger said with a wicked grin.

Rafe looked up at him with surprise.

"Put your hands on my hips and help me move in the right rhythm with you." Dodger said as he began slowly fucking himself on Rafe's hard cock.

Being an obedient husband, Rafe was happy to comply with Dodger's instructions and was soon guiding Dodger down to meet each of his upward thrusts.

"Yeah Rafe. That's so good." Dodger panted as he held onto Rafe's arms to brace himself.

The pace began to quicken and Rafe closed his eyes, lost in the sensation.

As he felt himself approaching the point of no return, he felt Dodger changing his grip and urging him to sit up.

When he opened his eyes, he saw that Dodger's fangs were bared and that Dodger was drawing him up, straining to reach his neck.

Somehow Rafe was able to lean toward Dodger without disrupting the rhythm of their lovemaking.

Just as Rafe reached his pinnacle, he felt Dodger's fangs pierce the skin of his neck.

As his orgasm took hold, his stabbing cock was jerking spasmodically deep inside Dodger.

Before it had completely registered that Dodger had bitten him, Rafe heard Dodger whispered, "I'm close. Do me."

Buried balls deep, and shooting his load, Rafe wondered what Dodger thought he was doing, then realized that Dodger had pulled back and was offering his own throat.

Just as his fangs pierced the skin, he felt Dodger's seed erupt in the space between them.

Suddenly, the taste of Dodger's blood registered. It was sweet and tangy, bringing with it the familiar satisfaction that always came with feeding. But on a deeper level, he felt something more.

He had heard the sensation described before as being like feeding on blood for the first time. Since he had no memory of that, he could only imagine that they were right.

The taste of Dodger's blood in his mouth was satisfying a need that he didn't know he had.

Suddenly, it was like their marriage was complete. They were truly and forever bonded. He now carried the essence of his mate with him, in his blood.

Dodger's lips covering his finally snapped him out of his amazement.

They held each other in silence for long minutes before Dodger finally said, "I didn't think it was even possible to love you more."

"Me, too." Rafe said quietly, still in awe of the incredible new sensation.

"You city folk sure are some smooth talkers." Dodger said with an exaggerated accent.

Rafe smiled, then said, "And you hoopies sure can fuck like bunnies."

Dodger laughed outright at that, then moved in to give Rafe a long, slow kiss.

"I love you, Rafe." Dodger said as he nuzzled against Rafe's neck.

"I love you, too, Dodger." Rafe said as a feeling of ultimate peace flooded through him.

Chapter 13

"Looks like you and the Doc had a good sleep." Sam said with a knowing grin.

Dodger tried to hide his blush as he walked to the coffee pot.

Sam chuckled at Dodger's reaction and waited for him to fill his cup.

Once Dodger had settled into a chair at the kitchen table, Sam quietly asked, "So, how's the boy doin?"

"You'd have to ask Rafe to be sure, but I got the feeling that he's going to be fine. It's just going to take a while for him to heal."

"Him and Justus seem to be gettin along real good. When I got up, I saw 'em in the livin room just yakin' an jawin' like old friends." Sam said with a smile.

"I'm glad. Being hurt is bad enough, but having to lay still is akin to torture when you're Jimmy's age. I think he'll need all the support from friends that he can get." Dodger said frankly.

Sam slowly nodded his agreement to the assessment, then looked Dodger in the eyes and quietly asked, "What about you?"

Dodger puzzled over the vague question for a moment, then hesitantly asked, "What about me?"

"Well, I figure that since you just changed the day before y'all got here that everything is probably just now settling in. I imagine that you might be feeling kind of uprooted and like you don't have any control. You know, kind of like you're just following along whichever way the wind is blowin at any given moment."

Dodger thought about the words, then slowly nodded before saying, "I hadn't really thought about it like that, but yeah. I do kinda feel that way."

"There ain't much I can do to help, but if you ever need someone to talk to about it, I'll always have the time." Sam said frankly.

Dodger considered the offer, then slowly said, "Since this is one of those things I can't talk to Rafe about, I may just take you up on that."

"Why can't you talk with your doctor?" Sam asked curiously.

"Because, if I ever told him that I was feeling uprooted, then he'd start feeling all guilty about bringing me here."

Sam slowly nodded, then said, "Folks say that being completely honest is the best way to keep a marriage happy."

Dodger slowly nodded as he thought about the words.

"Them people are damned fools." Sam said frankly.

Dodger looked at Sam with surprise.

"Listen, Son. You should never lie about the important things, but sometimes it's best to stretch the truth or flat out lie to the person you love, just because you care about them."

Dodger looked at Sam with confusion.

Sam smiled, then said, "If I woke up one morning and looked over at Mavis and she looked like the ass end of hard times, me telling her that wouldn't make either one of us feel one bit better. But if I tell her that she's the most beautiful thing in all of God's creation, well, she knows how she looks, and she appreciates that I love her enough to look her in the eyes and lie to her."

Dodger couldn't restrain a chuckle at the absurdity of the advice he was being given.

Sam smiled, then said, "Since you and the Doc are just starting out, I thought I'd go ahead and share with you what I wish someone would have told me." Sam said frankly.

"Thanks, Sam." Dodger said with a warm smile, then added, "I've always been told that honesty is the best policy. But I never considered that nothing in life is ever that simple or straightforward. I suppose that if you really love someone, then you should show it by telling them what they *need* to hear. And sometimes, the LAST thing they need to hear is the truth."

"I couldn't have said it better."Sam said, appreciating that Dodger understood what he was trying to say.

"It looks like it'll still be a while before breakfast, I think I'm going to go in and wake up Rafe." Dodger said as he went to get a mug of blood.

Sam smiled and nodded with approval.

"Good morning, Mavis." Dodger said with a smile as he passed her in the doorway on his way out of the kitchen.

* * * * *

"Good morning, Doctor. How are you doing today?" Sam asked casually as Rafe walked into the room.

"Better than I ever imagined possible." Rafe said as he took his seat.

Sam noticed Rafe's unusually happy expression and looked at Rafe curiously.

Finally, Rafe noticed his speculative gaze and quietly confided, "Dodger woke me up this morning and told me that I was the most beautiful sight in all of God's creation. It's just impossible to feel anything but wonderful when your day starts off that way."

"I've always thought so." Mavis said with a knowing smile at her husband from her place at the stove.

Sam grinned at her, then said to Rafe, "That boy loves you more than life itself. If you're interested, I've got a piece of advice about how you can keep him happy."

Rafe looked at Sam with surprise, then quickly said, "Yes! Please!"

"The best way I know to make someone like Dodger happy is to accept his help, accept his love, and allow him to make *you* happy. Allowing him to love you is one of the most powerful ways to show your love." Sam said as he looked Rafe in the eyes to convey his sincerity.

"And telling him that you love him every now and then wouldn't hurt either." Mavis said from the stove, still with her back to them.

"Telling him is nice. Showing him is even better. Especially when it's spontaneous and for no other reason than because you love him." Sam said seriously.

"Where is Dodger, now?" Mavis asked as she turned to look at Rafe curiously.

"He's taking a shower." Rafe responded, then noticed her raised eyebrow.

"We might be a few minutes late to breakfast." Rafe said with a grin as he stood.

"Don't you worry about that, none. There'll be food here when you're ready." Mavis said with a smile.

Rafe nodded as he rushed out of the room.

Mavis walked to Sam, then urged him to sit back so she could sit on his lap.

"The most beautiful sight in all of God's creation?" She said with an inquisitive smile.

"They're just starting out. I just want to get them goin in the right direction so that maybe someday they'll be as happy as we are."

Mavis smiled at her husband, then moved in for a long, slow kiss.

* * * * *

"You look like you're a million miles away." Chet said as he passed by the stall where Dodger had been working.

Dodger looked up and realized that he had stopped and was just staring off into space. As he scooped up the soiled bedding to make way for the fresh, he quietly said, "Yeah."

"Is it something you feel like talking about? I'm a good listener." Chet asked curiously.

"It's nothing bad. In fact, I guess I'm just kind of amazed at how wonderful my life is right now." Dodger said with a dreamy smile.

"Since you're shovelling horse shit, I'm guessing that you're speaking of 'now' in more general terms." Chet said with a grin.

Dodger chuckled, then said, "Yeah. I'm thinking of how wonderful my life is since I met Rafe."

"The sun'll be up in a few minutes. Why don't you head inside when you're finished with that one?" Chet asked with a tender smile.

"Don't you need help getting the horses in?" Dodger asked as he worked to finish clearing the floor.

Chet laughed, then asked, "How many miles away are you? All the horses are in except for Minerva, and she's waiting right outside for her stall to be ready."

Dodger looked around and was surprised to find that Chet was right.

He hurried to move the wheelbarrow out of his way, then started spreading fresh, clean straw.

When he had finished, he noticed that Chet had already taken the wheelbarrow away to empty it. He glanced at the false dawn overtaking the sky and hurried to the house.

* * * * *

As Dodger walked into the kitchen, something immediately caught his attention. A very low hiss could be heard coming from across the room.

Dodger blinked his eyes as a strange dizzy feeling washed over him.

Before he could think about what he was doing, Dodger hurried outside and found that the sun was already peaking over the horizon.

His skin began to burn and tingle as he ran around the side of the house and turned off the cutoff valve to the large propane tank.

As the burning on his skin was reaching the point that he could hardly bear it, he finally made his way back into the house.

The first thing he did was throw back the heavy drapes and started opening the windows.

"HELLO! IS ANYONE AWAKE? CAN ANYONE HEAR ME?" Dodger called out frantically as he felt the dizziness washing over him again.

After a moment, Sam hurried into the kitchen followed almost immediately by Mavis. They stopped in the doorway when they saw the early morning sunlight coming in the open windows.

"I don't know what happened, but I think there was a gas leak or something. I turned off the gas outside, but I wasn't sure if you might have already been overcome by it." Dodger hurried to explain. He noticed that his thoughts seemed to be getting sluggish and his voice didn't sound right.

Sam blinked his eyes a few times, then said to Mavis in slightly slurred speech, "Sweet thing, would you go check on the boy and the Doc?" I'll check on Justus and Bruce."

* * * * *

As Dodger found himself alone in the kitchen, he decided that it was probably safe to close the windows. The sunlight was likely to hurt them worse than any lingering gas at this point.

"Dodger? Are you alright?" Rafe asked as he rushed into the kitchen.

"I'm fine now that I know you're safe." Dodger said as he hugged Rafe desperately.

"What happened?" Rafe asked curiously.

"A gas leak, I guess. I could hear it, and it made my eyes sting."

"You look like you got some sun. Do you need anything for the pain?"

"Another kiss." Dodger said shyly.

Rafe smiled lovingly at Dodger, then very gently and tenderly kissed him.

* * * * *

"Near as I can tell, the pilot light got blown out and one of the burners was turned on." Sam said frankly.

"How could that happen?" Rafe asked suspiciously.

Bruce nodded, then turned his attention toward Sam, awaiting an answer.

"Dunno. But Dodger swears that he never went near the stove and one of the burners was turned on. And if the pilot light were lit, the room wouldn't have filled with gas. At some point it would have ignited.

"I haven't cooked anything for hours. I haven't even been in the kitchen since dinner. I've been working on the laundry most of the night." Mavis said seriously.

"It don't much matter at this point. But there's a gas cutoff behind the stove. Until I can check it out, we'll just turn the gas off when we're not using it." Sam said firmly.

Mavis nodded at her husband.

It took a moment before Bruce also nodded.

Dodger shared a concerned look with Rafe as they nodded their reluctant agreement.

"Doc, you'd better take that hero of yours to bed and give him a proper 'thank you' from all of us. If not for Dodger, we'd likely all be dead right now, either from the gas or from an explosion." Mavis said as she looked Rafe in the eyes.

"You can count on me. I'll take care of it." Rafe said as he turned his loving gaze on Dodger.

* * * * *

Within a few days, the incident with the gas had been mostly forgotten. Sam checked out the stove and declared that there was no gas leak and it appeared to be in perfect working order. Someone must have accidentally bumped the knob and blown out the pilot light without noticing.

Doing chores, helping Mavis and watching out for Jimmy shifted Dodger's focus to other things. He was delighted to find that the boy was showing signs of improvement every day.

"What's wrong?" Dodger asked as he rushed down the stairs.

When he had heard the sounds of Jimmy's sobs from the top of the stairs, he couldn't get down them fast enough.

Rafe's troubled gaze met Dodger's worried eyes as he whispered, "He remembered."

"Let me." Dodger said as he hurried to Rafe's side and scooted onto the edge of the bed.

Rafe carefully shifted the crying boy from his chest and into Dodger's waiting arms.

"I know, Jimmy. I know." Dodger said gently. "I know it's horrible. Just let it all out."

Rafe stood and watched for a moment, appreciating Dodger's sympathy for the distraught boy.

"My mama and daddy was good! They should be alive, not me!" Jimmy cried as Dodger held him close.

"I'm sure that if your mama and daddy could have had only one wish in all the world, it would have been for you to survive." Dodger said gently.

After a few minutes of nonstop crying, Jimmy finally managed to say, "Those men, they... they hurt me!"

"I know, Jimmy." Dodger said softly, "Those men had a disease that made them crazy. That's the disease that Rafe is trying to cure."

Dodger didn't know if any of his words were actually getting through to the boy, but he felt like he had to say them, nonetheless.

The sound of Jimmy's hitching breaths caused Dodger to realize that Jimmy's heavy sobs were putting stress on his injuries and that the boy was also in physical pain.

He looked up at Rafe desperately, hoping that he had some idea of what more they could do.

"Although I hate to do it, I'll get him a sedative." Rafe said decisively.

Dodger reluctantly nodded.

As Rafe walked away to prepare the injection, Dodger pulled away from Jimmy enough to look him in the eyes.

The despair and hopelessness in Jimmy's expression broke Dodger's heart and he felt tears welling in his own eyes as he whispered, "I'd do anything to take this pain away from you."

"Dodger!" Rafe barked.

The sound took him completely by surprise and he turned suddenly.

"You were enthralling him." Rafe said seriously.

Dodger realized what Rafe meant, then looked at Jimmy with concern.

The boy's eyes were wide and filled with wonder, but the tears had stopped.

"How are you, Jimmy?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"You're really pretty." Jimmy said distantly.

Dodger smiled, then responded, "You're kinda cute, yourself."

Jimmy chuckled, then looked around the basement curiously.

"Are you feeling better?" Rafe asked cautiously as he approached.

Jimmy slowly nodded, then quietly said, "I remember... all of it, I think."

"But how are you feeling?" Rafe asked curiously.

"It doesn't hurt anymore." Jimmy said with surprise, then looked at Rafe and Dodger with question.

"Jimmy, why don't you lay back and get some rest now. We can talk about it later and try to figure things out." Rafe said gently.

After a moment of hesitation, Jimmy nodded his agreement.

Dodger gently helped him to lie back, then made sure that he was comfortable.

Within a minute, Jimmy was fast asleep.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry, Rafe, I didn't know I was doing it." Dodger whispered as he walked to the other side of the room.

"I know, and it takes time to get control of it. I was just worried about what you might cause to happen by enthralling Jimmy without knowing what you were doing." Rafe said honestly.

"He seems to be better." Dodger said hesitantly.

"Yes. He *seems* that way." Rafe said quietly, then added, "But I'm not sure if we just made matters better or worse for him."

Dodger pulled Rafe into a hug, then said, "I'm not sorry it happened. He was too weak and hurt to be dealing with all of that at once."

After a moment, Rafe reluctantly said, "I think maybe you're right."

"Would you guys mind if I took Jimmy upstairs now?" Justus asked from the bottom of the stairs.

Rafe and Dodger looked at him curiously for a moment before Rafe answered, "No. That would be fine."

"I just thought that this way, we could all have dinner and we'll be nearby if Jimmy needs us for anything." Justus said frankly.

"Alright, but just be aware that Jimmy's especially fragile right now. Just a little bit ago he remembered what happened to him and his family." Rafe said gently.

"Oh god! That poor little guy." Justus said with a pained look that momentarily erased his usual grin.

"Yeah. But I'm not sure if he'll even remember it now. Dodger accidentally enthralled him and... we'll just have to see what happens. But, in any case, I thought you should know in case he has problems."

"I'll take good care of him." Justus said with his smile firmly back in place, then added, "He's my little buddy."

Dodger smiled at the comment, then watched as Justus gently picked up the sleeping boy and carried him up the stairs.

When they were finally alone, Dodger quietly said, "I think Justus is the perfect person to spend time with Jimmy, right now."

"Why is that?" Rafe asked curiously.

"I'm not sure." Dodger said as he put one arm around Rafe and guided him to walk slowly toward the stairs. "I've noticed that Justus is always up and happy, and never seems to take anything too seriously. I think that maybe after what Jimmy's just been through, spending time with Justus will be kinda like a vacation from his worries."

Rafe smiled at the observation, then said, "You may very well be right."

* * * * *

A knocking on their bedroom door woke Rafe and Dodger from their sleep.

"Come in?" Dodger said quietly.

Bruce cautiously poked his head in the bedroom door, unsure of his welcome, then hesitantly said, "The Doc's supplies are in. And I was wonderin if y'all would like to go with me to pick them up."

"It'd be better if I stayed here, so I can be ready to work as soon as the equipment arrives." Rafe said frankly, then looked at Dodger with question.

"Yeah. I'll go with you." Dodger said with a smile, happy at the prospect of being able to leave the ranch for a while.

"As soon as you're ready, we'll go. The sun's almost down." Bruce said, then withdrew.

"Good morning." Dodger said as he turned to look at Rafe with a smile.

"Good morning, Dodger." Rafe said in return, then added, "I love you."

"Yeah. I know. I still can't get over that." Dodger said with a giggle.

Rafe chuckled at the words.

"I love you, too." Dodger finally said, then moved in to give Rafe a full, deep kiss.

* * * * *

The trip into town went without incident, and they were even able to stop at a restaurant in town and get something to eat before their trip back.

Dodger didn't have a clue what fajitas were, but he absolutely loved them.

When they arrived back at the ranch, Bruce and Dodger worked steadily until the truck had been completely unloaded.

When he was finished, Dodger stopped to see how Jimmy was doing.

"I remember." Jimmy said quietly.

Dodger nodded, then waited for Jimmy to ask about what he wanted to know.

"The men that killed my daddy, they... they sucked his blood out." Jimmy said in a small voice.

"Yes. Those men were vampires." Dodger said softly.

Jimmy's eyes went wide, he obviously recognized the word.

"There's a whole lot to it, and not all of it's nice. But I promise not to lie to you. If you want to know something, I'll tell you what I know." Dodger said honestly.

"Are those men, the vampires, are they dead, now?" Jimmy asked hopefully.

"Yes. Bruce and some of the others found them and killed them all." Dodger said honestly.

Jimmy nodded, then quietly asked, "So, what you were saying before, about rabies, does that mean that my mama and daddy are vampires now?"

"No, Jimmy. If a vampire bites you and doesn't kill you, then you might become a vampire, but, as far as I know, your mama and daddy were killed." Dodger said softly.

"Am I going to become a vampire?" Jimmy asked weakly.

Dodger leaned in to give him a hug, then said, "No, Jimmy. Like I told you before, for some reason, you were bitten, but you didn't change. That's why Rafe is working so hard and taking so many blood samples. He's trying to figure out why you didn't become a vampire, so he can make a cure to use on other people who get bitten."

Jimmy thought about that for a few minutes, then finally nodded that he understood.

"There's more to know about vampires, if you want to hear it." Dodger said cautiously.

Jimmy looked up at Dodger, then slowly nodded.

"Not everyone who gets bitten by a vampire will turn mean, like the vampires that you saw. Some of them will turn out to be nice." Dodger said carefully.

Jimmy looked at Dodger with confusion.

"Vampires are stronger than regular people. They can hear and smell better and they can run a lot faster." Dodger said carefully.

"Okay." Jimmy whispered.

"Well, there are some people, we call them shadesiders, who are like that, but they're not mean and evil like vampires. They're strong and fast, but they're nice, too." Dodger said carefully.

"So they're sick like the vampires, but they're not bad?" Jimmy asked slowly.

"That's right." Dodger said with a smile.

"But vampires, they can't go out in the day." Jimmy said thoughtfully.

"Right." Dodger said with a nod.

Jimmy looked around the basement, then up at Dodger with sudden realization.

"That's right, Jimmy." Dodger said gently.

"You... you're a..." Jimmy stammered as he started to scoot away in fear.

"I'm a shadesider." Dodger said softly, then added, "And I'd never, ever hurt you."

Jimmy stopped and stared at Dodger with wide eyes.

"Just think about it, Jimmy. If any of us wanted to hurt you, we could have done it at any time." Dodger said honestly. "Me, Rafe, Justus, Arturo... all of us want for you to get better."

"Are you gonna make me like you?" Jimmy asked in a quivering voice.

"No, Jimmy. In fact, we couldn't change you, even if we wanted to. You're immune, remember?" Dodger said gently. "The only thing we want is for you to get better."

"And you want to find out how to make a cure." Jimmy added, a little bit challengingly.

"Yes. That, too. But we'd never hurt you. If we can make a cure, we may be able to change vampires back into regular people again, so what happened to you and your family will never have to happen again." Dodger said honestly.

Jimmy thought about it for a moment, then slowly nodded that he understood.

"Why don't you lay back and rest for a while? If you need anything at all, either Dr. Rafe or I will be here to get it for you." Dodger said softly.

Jimmy slowly nodded, then wriggled down in his bed to get comfortable.

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"You handled that well." Rafe said, as he put a hand on Dodger's shoulder.

"I just thought that it was important that he know." Dodger said distantly.

"After all he's been through, he deserves to know." Rafe said with a nod.

"And maybe knowing the whole truth will help him to be able to deal with what happened." Dodger said, hopefully.

"Maybe it will." Rafe said gently.

* * * * *

Dodger spent the next few days dividing his time between sitting with Jimmy, helping Mavis in the kitchen and doing chores around the ranch.

And, of course, each night was spent wrapped in the loving arms of his husband.

"Don't come down!"

Dodger stopped at the top of the stairs and cautiously asked, "Is there a problem?"

"No. But my patient would prefer to keep a few things between just him and his doctor. Give us one minute and we'll be finished." Rafe called out casually.

"Okay." Dodger said with a smile, then thought to ask, "Would anyone like a drink or a snack while I'm up here?"

There was a long quiet moment as Dodger waited for a response, then Jimmy called out, "Dr. Rafe says that if I'm hungry, I can go upstairs and get it myself."

Dodger was excited by the answer, and quickly asked, "Can I come down, now?"

"Yes, all the naughty bits are put away. You can come down." Rafe said happily.

Dodger raced downstairs and to Jimmy, who was standing beside his bed.

"Now remember, you're still not completely healed. You can walk around, but if you get tired, you need to lay down and get some rest." Rafe said firmly.

"I will, I promise, Dr. Rafe." Jimmy said, then gave Rafe a joyful hug.

Rafe shared a smile with Dodger, then said, "Why don't you two go upstairs so I can get back to my work, now."

"Can we get you anything while we're up there?" Dodger asked curiously.

"I'm fine. You two just have fun." Rafe said gently.

"Come on, Jimmy. How would you like to go for a walk outside?" Dodger asked happily.

"Yeah!" Jimmy answered, with excitement.

Rafe watched with a tender smile as Dodger and Jimmy walked up the stairs.

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"Isn't this nice?" Dodger asked as they walked out into the cool night air.

"I can't see where I'm going." Jimmy said as he stopped just outside the door.

"I know where there's a flashlight. If you'll stay here for just a minute, I'll go get it." Dodger said quickly.

"Yeah." Jimmy said quietly.

Dodger could tell that Jimmy was blinking his eyes and trying to get them to adjust to the near total darkness.

The sky was overcast, so there wasn't the usual moon and starlight that Dodger had become accustomed to.

There was still enough light for Dodger to see well enough, but apparently not enough for Jimmy.

Just inside the door of the barn, Dodger found the flashlight that he had noticed earlier in the week.

As he hurried back to Jimmy, he said, "I found it."

Jimmy jumped at the sound and Dodger could see him looking around blindly, trying to find the source of the voice.

"Here you go." Dodger said as he pressed the flashlight into Jimmy's hand.

After a moment of fumbling, Jimmy was able to find the switch and turned the flashlight on.

"Aggh! Not in the face." Dodger said as he squinted his eyes.

"Sorry." Jimmy said with a giggle, then pointed the flashlight out toward the barn.

"Come on. I'll show you around." Dodger said as he guided Jimmy down off the porch.

"You can really see in the dark?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Well, not in *complete* dark. But on a night like tonight, I can see pretty well." Dodger said honestly.

"It must be nice to be a shadesider." Jimmy said thoughtfully.

"Sometimes it is, sometimes it's not." Dodger said frankly. "It's just like anything else in life, there's good and bad."

"Were you bit by a vampire?" Jimmy asked as he pointed the flashlight ahead of him to see where they were going.

"No. I was lucky. I fell in love with a shadesider and decided that I wanted to become like him." Dodger said happily.

"Are you talking about Dr. Rafe?" Jimmy asked curiously.

"Yeah. That's right." Dodger said happily.

"So if he didn't bite you, then how did you become a shadesider?" Jimmy asked cautiously.

"That's a grownup thing that I don't think we should talk about until you're a little older." Dodger said frankly.

"Oh. You had sex!" Jimmy said in realization.

"Yeah. That's right. I just didn't think you needed to know about that, yet." Dodger said quietly.

"I grew up on a ranch like this. I got to see the horses and cows and dogs and cats doing it." Jimmy said seriously.

Dodger chuckled, then said, "Well, seeing that and thinking about people you know doing it can be very different things."

"Yeah. I guess." Jimmy said thoughtfully.

They walked for a few minutes, then Dodger quietly asked, "Do you want to talk about something?"

"When those vampires bit me... they did other stuff too." Jimmy said quietly.

"Yeah." Dodger said as he looked at Jimmy with concern.

"It hurt... I mean, it still hurts a little. Is that what Dr. Rafe did to you?" Jimmy asked with concern.

"No Jimmy." Dodger whispered. "What they did to you is something called 'rape'. It's a horrible thing. In fact, it's so bad that the people who do it who are caught are put in jail for a long long time, just the same as if they murdered someone."

Jimmy didn't respond, but Dodger got the feeling that he understood, at least a little.

"What Dr. Rafe and I do is making love." Dodger continued quietly. "It's loving and gentle and something that we both enjoy."

"But it hurts." Jimmy said as he looked up at Dodger, even though he couldn't see him.

"When you're careful and go slow, it doesn't hurt, it's wonderful." Dodger said gently.

"Is it the same with a girl?" Jimmy asked curiously.

Dodger thought about it for a moment, then said, "I don't know from personal experience, but I think so. If you're careful and make sure that she's enjoying it, then it's wonderful for you both."

Jimmy didn't give any reaction and seemed to be lost in thought.

"I think we'd better head back to the house, now. We don't want to go too far on your first walk." Dodger said gently.

"Yeah. I'm getting kinda tired." Jimmy said quietly.

"Would you like a piggy back ride back to the house?" Dodger asked with a smile.

"I can walk." Jimmy said frankly.

"I know you *can*." Dodger agreed. "But would you *like* a piggy back ride?"

Jimmy considered for a moment, then broke into a smile as he said, "Yeah."

"Then climb on!" Dodger said as he squatted down.

Jimmy immediately climbed onto his back and held on firmly.

"I tell you what, why don't you point the flashlight ahead of us and I'll take us for a little run before we go back inside." Dodger said happily.

"Okay." Jimmy said as he fumbled with the flashlight.

As soon as Jimmy was ready, Dodger took off running at full speed.

Jimmy began to giggle with excitement as he felt the wind rushing past his face and the sense of flying.

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"What's wrong?" Dodger asked with concern as he walked into the basement and found Rafe sitting with his head resting in his hands.

"Nothing's working." Rafe said distantly, not raising his head.

"The tests aren't going well?" Dodger asked sympathetically.

"I haven't had even a single slow growth pattern. According to the law of averages, I should have at least had a 'false' positive by now." Rafe said despondently.

"So what does that mean?" Dodger asked quietly.

"I think it means that Jimmy's immunity only works for him. I can't duplicate it in a culture, using his blood. None of the standard vaccine techniques yield anything that has any effect on the transformative." Rafe said, then finally raised his head and looked Dodger in the eyes.

"What do you do, next?" Dodger asked carefully.

"I'm going to start at the beginning, just to make sure that I didn't miss anything. And if none of my tests come back positive, then... I'm done." Rafe said quietly.

"Done? As in, we can go home?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Yes. If I can't isolate the problem, I honestly don't know of anything else to try." Rafe said regretfully.

"Come with me." Dodger said as he held out his hand.

"I can't. I have to get started." Rafe protested.

"You can get started, later." Dodger said firmly. "You warned me about not letting the work consume me. Now it's my turn to warn you."

Rafe thought about the words, then put his hand in Dodger's.

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When they crested the stairs, Rafe had assumed that they would be heading to the bedroom. Instead, Dodger led him through the kitchen and outside.

"Where are you taking me?" Rafe asked curiously.

"I think you need to get away from your work for a little while. I'm going to saddle some horses for us, then we're going to take a nice long ride." Dodger said seriously.

"Horses don't like us." Rafe said cautiously.

"These have been trained to ignore it." Dodger said, as they walked into the barn. "Come over here and let Chloe get to know you, while I get the tack we'll need."

"You look like you're pretty familiar with where everything is." Rafe said as he cautiously walked up to the horse.

"Yeah. This is one of the things I do when I come out to help." Dodger said frankly.

Rafe thought about that for a moment, then quietly said, "I should have asked about what you were doing."

"You were busy doing something very important, to help a lot of people. I was never the least bit bothered because you were concentrating on your work." Dodger said honestly, then opened Chloe's stall and stepped inside.

Rafe watched with admiration as Dodger expertly saddled Chloe.

"I'm surprised to see you out here, Doc." Bruce said as he walked into the barn.

"Dodger thought that I needed a break." Rafe said a bit cautiously.

"Well, I've noticed that Dodger has some pretty good instincts about such things, so he's probably right." Bruce said frankly.

Rafe nodded and watched Bruce carefully.

His mind wandered over the times that Dodger mentioned that he was going with Bruce to do this or that and he suddenly had an idea of how much time they had spent together.

"You don't mind if we take the horses out for a ride, do you? I didn't think you had anything going on with them, tonight." Dodger asked curiously.

"No. That's fine. We're busy getting the tractor and everything ready for planting." Bruce said cautiously, noticing Rafe's wary gaze directed at him.

"Great! Because I think we really need this ride." Dodger said honestly.

"Y'all have fun." Bruce said before turning to leave the barn.

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As soon as they were out of the yard, Dodger led them to a well worn path and let the horses walk at a casual pace.

Fortunately, there was enough moonlight that it was safe for the horses to walk without needing a lantern.

They rode in silence for a while, just absorbing the beauty of their surroundings.

The air was crisp and clear, the sky was alive with infinite stars and a slight breeze rustled the grass and low bushes along their path.

"As soon as I'm done with my tests, I'm going to make the call and arrange for us to go home." Rafe said distantly.

"How long will the tests take?" Dodger asked curiously.

"If I start tonight, right after I wake up... I should have all the results by tomorrow night." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"Rafe, there's something I've been wanting to talk to you about, but you were always so busy and it never seemed to be the right time." Dodger said quietly.

Rafe felt a knot tighten in his stomach, but forced himself to ask, "What is it?"

"Jimmy." Dodger said nervously.

Rafe didn't know exactly what he had been expecting, but that wasn't it.

"What about him?" Rafe asked curiously.

"When the tests are all done... what happens to him?" Dodger asked with concern.

Rafe realized what Dodger was asking, and quietly said, "I'll have a talk with Sam about it. I promise that before I make any travel arrangements, I'll know if it's going to be for two or three."

Dodger looked at Rafe with surprise, then broke into a smile.

"I already promised you that things would work out well for him. I always try to keep my promises." Rafe said seriously.

"Yes. You did." Dodger said happily, then added, "So I'm not going to worry."

"I think that if Sam decides to let Jimmy stay here, that it could be really good for him." Rafe said thoughtfully.

Dodger smiled, then said, "Yeah. Everyone here is really great."

Rafe glanced at him, then in a controlled voice he hesitantly said, "I've noticed that you've been spending a lot of time with Bruce."

Dodger thought for a moment, then said, "Yeah. I guess I have. He's one of those people who's just really easy to talk to."

Rafe nodded slowly, not particularly assured by Dodger's words.

"You know, Bruce is really a fantastic foreman. He's encouraged me to try new things and I can see why everyone around here looks up to him. The guy's a natural leader." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"Really? I guess I went with my first impression. I've thought he was kind of cold and standoffish." Rafe said honestly.

Dodger chuckled, then said, "It's the suit. He's got some insecurity about stuff like that. He says he's never done anything but work on a ranch. So I guess when he saw us all dressed up and buttoned down, he didn't know how to relate to us."

Rafe considered for a moment then said, "I guess I can see that."

"I told him that if he ever gets in the mood for a change, to call us. Even though he's never done anything but ranching, I think that with his good sense and good nature that he'd do well in Columbus." Dodger said with a smile.

"Are you attracted to him?" Rafe asked cautiously.

Dodger laughed at the thought, and quickly said, "Bruce? Not even for a second!"

Rafe let out a gust of breath in relief.

"Were you worried about me being attracted to Bruce?" Dodger asked in wonder.

"I've been consumed with my work lately and you've been spending time with him... and I could tell that you liked him." Rafe ended with a shrug.

"I love you so much!" Dodger said with delight.

"Then, you're not mad?" Rafe asked quietly.

"Mad? I'm flattered!" Dodger said with a broad smile.

"I love you, too, Dodger." Rafe said gently, then quietly added, "More and more every day."

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Dodger sat nervously and waited for what he knew was coming.

"I just finished my last test and there's no doubt. There is absolutely no way to make a serum from Jimmy's blood." Rafe said frankly.

"Well, I don't have as big a stake in this as you do, so it don't really bother me much." Sam said frankly. "It would've been nice if we could have a way to save people who was bit or to turn the critters back. But we're no worse off than we were before."

"Thanks for taking us in, and letting us try. You've been really good to us and we really do appreciate it." Rafe said seriously.

"It was no hardship. Hell, Mavis has been on cloud nine having help in the kitchen and someone to talk to. Y'all are really gonna be missed." Sam said honestly.

"Thank you for saying so." Rafe said quietly, then continued, "That only leaves the question of what's to be done with Jimmy."

"I figured he'd stay here with us." Sam said as though it were obvious.

"I didn't want to make any assumptions. I mean, taking him in to raise is a commitment of at least ten years." Rafe said quietly.

"To hell with that. We're adopting him!" Sam said frankly. "As soon as he's well and truly up on his feet again, we'll get it worked out so he'll be our son, by their law and ours. That way, no matter what Jimmy decides to do later on, he'll always have a family." Sam said firmly.

"You and Mavis are going to be great parents!" Dodger said quickly. He had been trying to keep quiet, but just couldn't hold back.

"What would you think of being, sort of like god parents?" Sam asked cautiously.

"Sure. What would we have to do?" Dodger answered immediately, then thought to look at Rafe to see if he was in agreement.

"Sometimes things have a way of turning bad, especially for folk like us. So, if y'all agree, I'm going to let Jimmy know that if he's ever in trouble, to go to you, where he'll be safe." Sam said seriously.

Dodger was about to respond, then turned suddenly when he heard something outside the door.

"Of course." Rafe said for both of them. "We'd be honored."

"Yeah. I thought you would." Sam said with a casual smile.

Dodger listened carefully for a moment longer, then decided that it must have been his imagination.

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"Did you get all the travel arrangements made?" Dodger asked as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Yes. Justus and I just got back a few minutes ago. And I have a message for you." Rafe said absently as he wrapped a small piece of equipment in several pieces of newspaper.

"For me?" Dodger asked with surprise.

"Manna said that when we get back, that Ernie and Blake would probably enjoy spending some time talking with you." Rafe said as he carefully placed his newspaper bundle into a cardboard box.

"Why would they want to talk to me?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Apparently, they always wanted to be a cowboy." Rafe said as he met Dodger's gaze with a tender smile.

"Well, I don't know how much of a cowboy I am, but I'll be happy to tell them about our time at the ranch." Dodger said past a grin.

"I know they'll enjoy hearing about it." Rafe said warmly.

"Are you about done packing everything up?" Dodger asked quietly as he looked around the lab area.

"Yes. I just finished. I'm leaving anything that Sam might possibly be able to use, so there wasn't that much." Rafe said as he looked around, then asked, "Are you ready to go?"

"I will be, soon. I just need for you to do something for me, first." Dodger said with a secretive smile.

Rafe grinned, then quietly asked, "Is it something naked?"

"No. In fact, I need for you to put on your suit." Dodger said frankly.

"My suit? For what?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"I just think you should look nice for our wedding." Dodger said with a smile.

"You want to have the wedding here?" Rafe asked with surprise.

"Yeah. We've been here long enough that I think of all these people as my friends. It feels right that we do it now." Dodger said seriously. "That is, if you still want to marry me."

"Don't ever doubt it." Rafe said gently.

"I didn't." Dodger said with a grin, then quickly added, "We need to get dressed, now."

"Now? As in 'right now'?" Rafe asked with surprise.

Dodger seemed to consider the question for a moment before answering, "Yeah, someone mentioned to me that 'now' can be used as kind of a general term, but that's the now I was thinking of. Come on, everyone is going to be waiting on us."

"Everyone?" Rafe asked in astonishment.

"Yeah. I told everyone while you were making your calls." Dodger said, then coaxed Rafe to walk toward their bedroom.

"I guess you didn't have a doubt." Rafe chuckled.

"Not even one." Dodger said with a grin.

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"I've already claimed Jimmy as my best man. So who do you want to stand with you?" Dodger asked happily.

Rafe looked around, then smiled as he said, "Bruce."

"Be nice." Dodger said with a grin.

"I'm always nice." Rafe said with an answering smile.

Dodger waved at Bruce to get his attention, then summoned him over with a gesture.

"I'm going to get Jimmy. When Sam nods at you, walk down the aisle." Dodger said seriously.

"I've got it." Rafe said assuringly, then looked at Bruce who was now by his side.

"Will you stand with me?" Rafe asked seriously.

"Oh, sure." Bruce said with surprise.

"One thing before we start." Rafe added, "Dodger and I talked and... if you ever feel like you're ready to try doing something else for a living, there will always be a place for you in Columbus."

Bruce stared at Rafe with disbelief for a moment, then smiled as he said, "Thank you."

Rafe was watching carefully, and when Sam nodded in his direction, he said, "Let's go."

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"Friends and beloved family, Rafe and Dodger haven't been here with us long. But I suppose it's been long enough. Because they've decided that they want to share their joy with all of us by having this here ceremony. By our laws and way of thinking, they were married as soon as they agreed that they were. But many of us choose to have a ceremony, because sometimes a love is just so dang big that you've got to declare yourself and let the world know. So, that's what we're doin here now. Rafe, do you love Dodger? Do you trust him? Do you RESPECT him?"

Rafe looked Dodger in the eyes to convey his sincerity, then reverently said, "I do."

"What about you, Dodger. How do you feel about this here doctor of yours? Do you love him? Do you trust him? Do you respect him?"

Unformed tears glistened in Dodger's eyes and small smile of the joy he was feeling slipped out as he nearly whispered in an amazed voice, "I really do."

"Well, good! Because if you didn't, this would've been one hell of a big waste of time. Y'all git on in there and kiss. You're married, ain't ya!"

Part 3: Going Home

Chapter 14

"Do you need to hold my hand?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"You know, I wasn't even thinking about it. After everything we've gone through at the ranch, it didn't even occur to me to be afraid of the take off." Dodger said with a smile, then added, "But holding your hand sounds nice."

Rafe smiled as he offered his hand.

Dodger accepted and held it gently as the plane lifted into the air.

Once the plane leveled out, Rafe said, "Since neither of us have any commitments for the time being, I was wondering how you would feel about us taking a little drive tomorrow."

"A drive to where?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"A little town in Eastern Ohio." Rafe said evasively.

"And what will we be doing in this little town in Eastern Ohio." Dodger asked playfully, recognizing the game for what it was.

"We'll be visiting a friend of yours." Rafe said with a smile.

"A friend? ...Of mine?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Yes. Well, him and his grandparents." Rafe said with a huge grin.

"Little Joe?" Dodger asked with excitement.

"Yes. While I was making my travel arrangements, I checked in with my office to see if they had followed up on his condition. They happened to have contact information, so I called to see how he and his family were doing. In the course of conversation, we were invited to dinner at their house tomorrow night." Rafe said with a grin.

"So what you're saying is that we're going to be having dinner with a family that almost died of food poisoning? Is that really such a smart idea?" Dodger asked, only half-seriously.

Rafe gave a full, honest laugh, then said, "You know, that didn't even occur to me. I just know that they seem like a really good and decent family and I think it would be nice to spend an evening with them."

Dodger looked at Rafe suspiciously, feeling that he had some ulterior motive.

"Would you care for a drink?" The stewardess asked courteously as she offered drinks on a tray.

"Yes. Thank you." Rafe said happily.

Dodger nodded and took a glass for himself.

Just as he was about to take a sip of the drink, a shrill cry rose up and filled the first class cabin.

Dodger quickly set his glass down, then clamped his hands over his ears to try to protect his super sensitive hearing.

"She's teething." The woman behind them said, not apologetically, but as if the explanation absolved her from any responsibility for the behavior of her child.

"Dodger." Rafe said firmly, to gain his attention.

After another shriek from the toddler, Dodger turned his attention to Rafe.

"Don't enthrall the baby." Rafe said firmly.

"I wasn't going to." Dodger said defensively.

"You don't have control of it yet and you've already proven that you can do it without thinking." Rafe said seriously, then added, "It seems that you have more of a natural talent for it than I ever did."

Dodger winced at an escalating scream.

Once it subsided, Dodger asked, "Really?"

Rafe nodded, then said, "You took away the pain and fear associated with Jimmy's memories of the deaths of his parents and of the rape. I doubt that I'd be able to..."

A long sustained wailing cry interrupted Rafe.

Dodger clamped his hands tightly over his ears, then glanced behind them with irritation.

In an instant, the first class cabin became blessedly silent.

"I warned you not to." Rafe said seriously.

"I know. And I didn't mean to." Dodger said quietly, then shyly added, "But isn't this nice?"

"How nice will it be if that child grows up to be mute because of what you just did?" Rafe asked seriously.

"Oh. I guess that would be bad." Dodger said timidly, then quietly asked, "Is there a way to undo it?"

Rafe thought for a moment, then carefully said, "Probably. If you can remember exactly what you were thinking when you enthralled the baby, you might be able to enthrall her again and give the opposite suggestion."

Dodger thought for a moment, then seemed to be confident that he remembered.

"Are you ready to try?" Rafe asked gently.

Dodger glanced behind them, then quietly asked, "Can I do it right before we land?"

Rafe considered for a moment and had a conflicted look on his face.

Dodger waited expectantly.

Finally, Rafe hesitantly said, "I suppose there's no harm in waiting for a little bit."

Dodger smiled, then rested back into his seat, enjoying the peace and quiet.

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"Did you remember to call Mrs. Lewellyn to let her know that we were coming home?" Dodger asked suddenly.

Rafe looked at him with surprise, then reluctantly admitted, "No. I didn't think about it."

"I guess we'll just have to see what she left in the house. If there isn't anything to eat, we can go grocery shopping for ourselves." Dodger said frankly.

"If our flight arrives on schedule, then we should have plenty of time to stop somewhere for breakfast and still make it home before sunrise." Rafe said thoughtfully. "I'm sure by the time we get home, we'll both be ready for a well-deserved rest and we already have plans for dinner."

"We get to sleep in our own bed." Dodger said happily.

"That *will* be nice, won't it?" Rafe said gently.

"And we won't have to worry about being quiet." Dodger said with excitement.

"Just keep in mind that I'll need to get at least *some* sleep." Rafe said with a grin.

"I'll try to remember." Dodger said playfully.

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"I was thinking that, since the cold and flu season has passed, there isn't any reason that I couldn't take some additional time off from my practice." Rafe said in a seemingly casual tone.

Dodger looked at him with surprise, then quietly asked, "Were you thinking about taking a vacation?"

"No. I think I've had my fill of travel for the time being." Rafe said with a smile, then added, "Actually, I was thinking that my husband and I haven't really had a chance to spend much time together since we got married."

"And since I already received my diploma, I don't have to be doing any studying." Dodger said with a grin.

"That's right. Neither of us will have anything demanding our attention." Rafe said peacefully.

Dodger melted at the loving look in Rafe's eyes and couldn't imagine anything that he would rather be doing.

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When the announcement was made that the plane was about to land, Rafe looked at Dodger expectantly.

"Do I have to?" Dodger whined half-heartedly.

"I'm afraid so. Sometimes it's not easy to do the right thing." Rafe said regretfully.

Dodger took in a slow, cleansing breath and tried to clear his mind so he could focus on the task at hand.

Rafe watched him carefully, prepared to offer any suggestions or encouragement that might be needed.

Finally, Dodger turned in his seat to look into the row behind him. A fleeting glow seemed to pass over him, one of those things that would be easy to dismiss as being a trick of the lights.

The baby immediately let out a blood-curdling scream.

Dodger winced at the sound, then covered his ears as he looked behind them again.

Rafe reached out a hand toward Dodger, but it was already too late. Dodger gave another brief glow before sitting and looking forward.

Before Rafe could ask Dodger what he had done, he heard the woman behind him trying to soothe the baby with gentle whispers.

"What did you do?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"I think I undid what I did before." Dodger said quietly, but the guilty look in his eyes gave him away.

"No, I mean, what did you do to the mother?" Rafe asked as he held Dodger's guilty gaze.

After a moment of hesitation, Dodger quietly said, "I might have reminded her that she's responsible for the way her child acts..."

Rafe waited expectantly, having a feeling that there was more.

"...and I might have also suggested that if her kid kept crying that way, everyone in the airport might form a lynch mob." Dodger finished guiltily.

Rafe opened his mouth, obviously about to say something, but then seemed to think better of it. He glanced over his shoulder into the row behind them where the woman was gently bouncing the whimpering baby, then gave an unconcerned shrug.

Dodger smiled at the reaction as he noticed that the plane seemed to be making it's final approach for landing.

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Even in the early morning, the harsh lighting in the airport was difficult to endure. But finally, Rafe and Dodger had located all their luggage and were on their way to the long-term parking.

Once they were out of the airport, Dodger quietly said, "I hope Jimmy's okay."

"Since they don't have phone service at the ranch, we won't be able to call and talk with him, but I've already made arrangements with Justus so that we can stay in touch." Rafe said frankly.

"Good. Even though I'm glad that we're home, I'm really going to miss the ranch." Dodger said as he looked out the window into the darkness.

"I think I will, too." Rafe said honestly.

Dodger absently nodded that he had heard.

"You know, this is one of those things that happens when you have a long life." Rafe said conversationally.

Dodger looked up curiously, then asked, "What's that?"

"People come and go." Rafe said without expression as he kept the majority of his attention on his driving.

"So, you don't get the chance to have any relationships that last?" Dodger asked hesitantly.

"Sure you do. But you don't always know which relationships will work out that way." Rafe said frankly, then added, "What I'm trying to say is that sometimes in our lives, we'll meet some very nice people and become attached to them, but then circumstances change and we end up having to part company."

"So you don't think we'll continue to be friends with the people at the ranch?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"They'll always be our friends. But they won't be a part of our daily lives. It's impossible to predict what tomorrow will bring. There's a chance that we'll never see them again. And I suppose that there's just as good a chance that a situation will arise that will bring us back together. It's impossible to predict, but we have to accept what happens."

Dodger slowly nodded, then quietly said, "I think that what you're talking about isn't a Shadesider thing, it's just life."

After a long silence, Rafe finally responded, "I've never been a Brightsider. It's hard for me to imagine how they perceive things."

Dodger thought about Rafe's words, then quietly said, "I think, from what little bit I've seen, that Brightsiders and Shadesiders both experience just about the same things, except that the Shadesiders are around long enough to pay attention to it. They kind of have a better view of the big picture, while Brightsiders focus more on their individual piece of the world."

"That sounds reasonable." Rafe said with a nod.

Dodger smiled at him, then said, "I like that we can talk about things like this. I mean, you're over 600 years old and you're a doctor, but when we sit down and talk together like this, I don't feel stupid."

"Well, unless we start talking about microbiology or infection vectors, I can't see any reason that you *should* feel stupid. I've learned about some things that you haven't, but I'm sure that there are plenty of things that you're more knowledgeable about." Rafe said frankly.

"For example..." Dodger said with a challenging grin.

"Alright. You grew up on a farm. In all my years, I've never really done anything like that. When I was a child, I lived a lot closer to the land than I do now..."

"How do you mean?" Dodger asked curiously.

"When I was young, the person I bought my food from was most likely the person who grew it. Now, when I open a can of green beans, I don't know the person who grew them or even what part of the world they come from." Rafe said honestly.

"So you've never grown anything?" Dodger asked curiously.

"No. Not unless you count bacterial cultures." Rafe said absently.

"So you *are* a farmer, it's just on a much smaller scale." Dodger said with a grin.

Rafe broke into a smile at the words, then said, "That's me, farmer Rafe."

Dodger chuckled as he looked at his husband adoringly.

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"What are you doing?" Dodger asked curiously as Rafe pulled onto a side road.

"Didn't you see that sign? I thought we'd stop at that truck stop for Breakfast." Rafe said seriously.

"Um. Okay. I guess." Dodger said uncertainly.

"You don't have to worry, Dodger. Even though they may not always be comfortable for us, truck stops are usually safe places for a Shadesider to stop." Rafe said frankly.

"Why is that?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Mainly, because they're open twenty-four hours. That causes them to attract a larger than average Darksider and Shadesider clientele." Rafe said honestly as they pulled into the parking lot.

"There might be Darksiders here?" Dodger asked with surprise.

"Possibly. But it's kind of an unwritten law that places like this are neutral ground. If we leave them alone, they'll leave us alone." Rafe said as he stopped the car.

"What if they don't?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"I think that if that happened, the person who broke the peace would probably either be exiled or would forfeit their life." Rafe said as he turned to look Dodger in the eyes.

"You'd kill him?" Dodger asked with surprise.

"No. That would be more of a Darksider solution. The Shadeside community would most likely take a person who knowingly and willingly instigated a confrontation in a neutral place and ask him to leave their community. I mean, no one could reasonably be expected to trust in the discretion of someone who broke such a basic law." Rafe said carefully.

"I guess not." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"Come on. It's not anything you have to worry about. It just means that this is a place where we can stop and have a good meal." Rafe said cheerfully, then opened his door.

"What do we do if there's a Darksider in there?" Dodger asked as he got out of the car.

"Just stay out of his way." Rafe said frankly, then stopped and turned to look at Dodger as he continued, "As long as you don't put him in a position where he has to acknowledge you, then he probably won't. It's really just that simple."

Dodger nodded that he understood, then followed as Rafe led the way into the truck stop.

* * * * *

As they walked into the truck stop's dining room, Dodger was surprised to find that the lighting was perfectly comfortable.

Although he could detect a lingering cigarette smoke smell in the air, it wasn't anything like what he had experienced at the airport.

After taking his seat, he noticed that one or two of the people at the other tables were smoking, but still, the smell of the cigarette smoke wasn't overpowering him. The ventilation seemed such that it drew the cigarette smoke away from the dining room.

"They have a thing here, the Country Breakfast. It has everything that you like." Rafe said as he looked at his menu.

It took a moment, but Dodger was finally able to direct his attention to the task at hand.

As he looked over the menu, he found the breakfast that Rafe was talking about and agreed that it did seem to have everything that he enjoyed.

"Mornin' guys. Would you all want some coffee?" The middle-aged waitress asked casually.

"Yes." Rafe said immediately, then turned to Dodger and said, "I don't usually like coffee, but theirs is really good."

Dodger looked up at the waitress and nodded that he would like some.

"Do you all know what you're wantin yet?" The waitress asked slowly.

"I want the country breakfast." Rafe said simply.

"Make that two." Dodger quickly added as he closed his menu.

"Straight up?" The waitress asked curiously.

"Yes." Rafe answered for both of them.

The waitress scribbled something on her pad, then called out toward the kitchen, "Adam & Eve on a log, short stack and back, twice!"

"Two times!" A man's voice responded loudly from the kitchen.

Dodger looked at Rafe with puzzlement.

Rafe smiled and waited for Dodger's question.

"What's Straight up?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"She was asking if we wanted our meals made the way that they're described in the menu. If we wanted anything prepared a particular way or something substituted, I would've said 'no'." Rafe said simply.

Dodger slowly nodded, then leaned forward and quietly asked, "Did you understand her when she called out our order?"

Rafe chuckled, then admitted, "Not a word of it."

Dodger smiled at the answer, then looked up as the waitress approached with two cups of coffee.

* * * * *

"Rafe." Dodger said hesitantly.

"What is it?" Rafe asked as he looked up from his meal.

"I think there's a Darksider here. He's looking at me." Dodger said cautiously.

"Ignore him." Rafe said simply, then took another sip of his coffee.

"I don't think I can." Dodger said as he looked down at his plate.

Rafe realized how anxious Dodger was and casually turned to look over his shoulder, to see if the man watching them was any threat.

Dodger watched Rafe, then waited expectantly.

"He's not a Darksider, he's a Shadesider." Rafe said as he turned his attention back to his meal.

"He is? Then why's he giving me dirty looks?" Dodger asked curiously.

"I'm sure those are directed at me. That guy's name is Collin. We've had our differences." Rafe said honestly.

"Do you think he's going to cause trouble?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"No. In fact, I think he'd probably go out of his way to avoid having anything to do with me." Rafe said frankly.

Dodger nodded, then glanced past Rafe to see what the man was doing.

"Don't worry about him, Dodger. Just enjoy your meal." Rafe said gently.

Dodger turned his attention back to his breakfast, then quietly said, "I think this is the first time I've seen anyone who knew you who wasn't your friend."

"Collin *is* my friend, in a way. I have a great deal of respect for him and I even trust him. I just don't happen to agree with some of the things that he believes." Rafe said casually.

Dodger started eating again as he considered Rafe's words.

"How do you like your food?" Rafe asked with a gentle smile.

"It's great. Thanks for suggesting it." Dodger said with a loving look into Rafe's eyes.

* * * * *

They arrived at the house just before sunrise.

As they drove up the driveway, Dodger thought that he had never seen such a beautiful sight.

"I really missed this place." Dodger said warmly.

"Dorothy was right." Rafe said with a smile as he hit the button to automatically open the garage door.

"Who? What?" Dodger asked with confusion.

"You know, in The Wizard of Oz?" Rafe asked as he parked the car.

Dodger puzzled over the statement for a moment, then broke into a smile as he said, "Okay. I got it."

"I knew you would." Rafe said happily, then asked, "Would you rather do the laundry before we go to bed, or leave it for later?"

"Well..." Dodger began with a predatory grin, "...I think that if we started the laundry right now, that we would have time to do 'other things' while we waited for it to be finished."

"Are you thinking of noisy things that we couldn't do while we were at the ranch?" Rafe asked with a restrained smile.

"Loud things. Messy things... maybe even things somewhere other than the bedroom." Dodger said with a hungry look in his eyes.

"In the bathtub!" Rafe said quickly.

"Yes! After having to be so careful about every drop of water we used, it would be so wonderful if we could take a bath together." Dodger said happily.

"Let's get the car unpacked so we can get to it." Rafe said enthusiastically.

* * * * *

Dodger awoke with a smile on his face. While the laundry did eventually get done, most of their morning was spent having sloppy, loud, silly fun.

As Dodger opened his eyes, he found Rafe watching him with a tender smile.

"I love you." Rafe whispered.

"I love you, too." Dodger replied.

"As much as I don't want to say this, we need to get up, so we can get ready to leave." Rafe said frankly.

"But it isn't even dark yet." Dodger said as he glanced at the glow of light around the heavy drapes on the window.

"We need to leave early, if we're going to arrive at a decent hour." Rafe said frankly.

"You're going to drive in the daylight?" Dodger asked with concern.

"Yes. But we'll be driving East, so the sun will be behind us. As long as we wear our gloves, hats and sunglasses, we should be able to travel without too much trouble." Rafe said gently.

"Okay." Dodger reluctantly agreed, then broke into a smile as he said, "It'll be nice to see for myself that Little Joe is feeling better."

"Yes. And I think it will also be good for you to spend some time around Brightsiders." Rafe said frankly.

"I bet I've spent more time around them than you have the past sixteen years." Dodger said with a smile.

Rafe chuckled, then said, "I suppose that's true, but you were one of them at the time. Now that things have changed, you might need to alter a few of your habits."

"Like what?" Dodger asked with interest.

"Just little things like shaking hands, avoiding bright light, garlic... you know, the basic stuff. If you learn how to navigate around those little obstacles, then you'll be able to relax and enjoy their company." Rafe said seriously.

"Well, I guess that I've got the perfect teacher for this lesson because I lived with you for months and didn't have a clue." Dodger said with a chuckle.

"You knew something wasn't quite right, you just hadn't figured out *what*, yet." Rafe said with a smile.

"Yeah, as if anyone could have figured it out." Dodger said with a laugh, then leaned forward to pull Rafe into a firm hug.

Rafe put his arms around Dodger, then quietly said, "You know, we don't have to get ready to leave right this minute."

Dodger nuzzled Rafe's neck, then whispered, "What did you have in mind?"

"Nothing at all." Rafe said frankly, much to Dodger's surprise.

After a moment, Rafe quietly continued, "Why don't you decide... Anything you want."

Dodger moved away from Rafe's neck and gave him a long firm kiss before saying, "After this morning, I didn't know if you'd be in the mood again so soon."

"You inspire me."

* * * * *

Their preparation for leaving took a little bit longer than anticipated, mostly due to Dodger's insistence that they dress more casually, so Little Joe and his family wouldn't get the impression that they were 'stuck up'.

Once they were suitably attired, Rafe started the long drive toward the East.

"I told them that you're allergic to garlic." Rafe said into the silence.

Dodger looked at him curiously for a moment, then said, "Yeah. That's smart."

"I just wanted to let you know in advance in case they ask you about it." Rafe said honestly.

Dodger nodded that he had heard.

"Is something bothering you?" Rafe asked curiously.

Dodger smiled, then said, "No. It's just... the farther East we go, the more it's looking like where I grew up."

"That makes sense. We're entering the foothills of the Appalachian mountain range." Rafe said casually.

Dodger nodded as he looked out the car window at the scenery passing them by.

"You know, if Little Joe or his grandparents have a pet, it's going to react badly to us." Rafe said as he glanced at Dodger out of the corner of his eye.

"Yeah. Chet told me about horses usually acting that way. But why are they afraid of us?" Dodger asked curiously.

"It seems to be instinctive. I suppose it's possible that a long time ago, those animals that were afraid of us ran away, and those that weren't, were eaten. If that kept on for several generations, the innate fear of us would be a part of their genetic heritage." Rafe said speculatively.

"Oh. I thought that maybe it was some kind of extra sensory thing that they could detect about us and it frightened them." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"It could very well be. There's so much about us that isn't quantifiable or just isn't known, that I suppose any theory would be just as valid as any other." Rafe said honestly.

"You're doing it again." Dodger said with a grin at his husband.

"What's that?" Rafe asked curiously.

"You're making me feel as smart as you are." Dodger said adoringly.

"That's because you are."

* * * * *

As they entered town, Dodger watched curiously as Rafe expertly navigated the winding streets that seemed to hairpin and double back as often as not.

"How do you know where you're going?" Dodger finally asked.

"They gave me directions." Rafe said simply, then pulled onto a steep road that seemed to be little better than a sheer cliff.

Dodger held his breath until the road became more level, then quietly asked, "How is it that you can follow someone else's directions, but you can't find your parked car when it's just a block away?"

Rafe grinned at the question, then answered, "It's just the way I am, Dodger. I'm usually pretty good about remembering detailed information. Something like this, something new, doesn't really present much of a challenge for me. But when I try to remember the same thing, day after day, I sometimes forget which day I'm remembering. It all just blends together."

After a moment to consider, Dodger quietly said, "I guess that sorta makes sense."

"Ask me about it again in about five hundred years and we'll see if it's something that comes with being long lived, or if it's just me." Rafe said with a slight smile.

Dodger chuckled, then responded, "Yeah. I'll do that."

"We're here." Rafe said as he slowed the car to pull into the driveway of a modest home, set back from the street with in large yard.

Dodger looked around in the early evening light and decided that he liked the look of the place.

It certainly wasn't anywhere as nice as Rafe's home. But, by the same token, it wasn't a dilapidated shack, like where he grew up. It looked like the kind of place that Dodger thought of when he imagined where a 'normal' person would live.

* * * * *

As Dodger and Rafe approached the front door, it flew open and a familiar figure

dashed toward them.

"I couldn't believe it when Grandpa said you were coming! It's wonderful that you're here." Little Joe said with a beaming smile. Before Rafe or Dodger could react, Little Joe pulled them both into a joyful hug.

"You'll have to forgive my grandson. He's had ants in his pants since he heard you two were coming." An elderly man said as he slowly stepped off the single step from the front porch.

Little Joe seemed to realize what he was doing and quickly stepped back as he said, "I'm sorry. I'm just really glad that you're here."

"We're happy to be here." Rafe said warmly as Dodger nodded his agreement.

"Well, since Little Joe seems to have forgotten his manners, please allow me to make introductions. I'm John Luyster and this is my wife Hester." The elderly man said as he offered his hand.

Due to the early evening chill, it didn't seem out of place for Rafe and Dodger to be wearing gloves as they each firmly shook John's hand and nodded their greetings to his wife.

"Behind me is our daughter, Olivia. And, of course, you've met our grandson, Little Joe." John finished with an adoring smile at his grandson.

"I'm Dr. Raphael Killian. I'd be pleased if you would call me Rafe, and my companion's name is Desmond Tribodeaux." Rafe said somewhat formally.

"Please, call me Dodger." Dodger said timidly.

"When Little Joe told us about you, I got the sense that you were a father and son travelling together, but now I can see that you're far too young to be Dodger's father and he doesn't look like you." Olivia said curiously.

"We're not father and son, but we 'are' related... by marriage." Rafe said pleasantly.

It took every bit of self control at his disposal for Dodger not to react with amusement to the comment.

Before anyone could dig deeper into their relationship, Hester said, "We should get in out of this chill. Everyone, please come in and we'll have dinner ready in just a few minutes."

* * * * *

"You have a beautiful home." Rafe said as he looked around the neat little house.

There was an abundance of knickknacks on display throughout the living room, but not to the point were they looked like clutter.

"Thank you. Hester and I bought this place the year after we got married and have been happy here ever since." John said as he gestured for Rafe and Dodger to have a seat on the couch, then asked, "Can I get you something to drink before dinner?"

"No, thank you." Rafe said for both of them.

John accepted the answer, then took a seat in a well-worn recliner.

"When I got out of the hospital, mom decided that we should come back here to help Grandma and Grandpa." Little Joe said, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Family is important. I'm glad that your grandparents were able to depend on you when they needed you." Rafe said with a warm smile at Little Joe.

"Well, I wasn't really that much help. Mom was running around taking care of all three of us. But it was better for us to be here because otherwise me and Mom and Dad would have all been worried about how Grandma and Grandpa were getting along." Little Joe said frankly.

"We've been so blessed by having them here." John said with a smile at his grandson.

"So, where do you live when you're not here, Little Joe?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Santa Clarita, California. My dad has a job there." Little Joe said simply, then quickly added, "He really wanted to come here with us, but he had to work."

"I'm sure that was a very difficult decision for him." Rafe said as he looked at Little Joe seriously.

"Yeah. He took a week off from work when I was in the hospital. Even though there wasn't much he could do but just sit there... well, just having him there really helped." Little Joe finished timidly.

Before anyone could respond, Hester called through the doorway, "Dinner's on the table!"

* * * * *

Dodger flashed an amused glance as they took their seats.

Rafe involuntarily smiled in return.

"Before we start eating, I'd like to propose a toast." John said from the head of the table.

Everyone around the table turned their full attention to him.

"To Dr. Killian. If not for you, my wife and I and our grandson would likely not be here to enjoy this meal. Thank you." John said as he raised his glass in toast.

Everyone took a sip of their drinks, but before they could put their glasses down, Little Joe stood and said, "I'd also like to drink to Dodger. Rafe saved my life, and I'm really thankful for that, but Dodger helped me through the scariest thing that's ever happened to me."

"Here, here." John said from the front of the table, then everyone took another drink.

"We'd better start eating or we're all going to be filled up on drinks." Hester said before anyone could propose another toast.

A few chuckles went around the table as everyone tucked in.

* * * * *

"Dr. Killian." Olivia said, breaking the silence that had fallen over the table as everyone ate.

"Please, call me Rafe." Rafe responded gently.

"Rafe, my husband and I have been having a bit of a dispute with Little Joe about something and I'd like to get your thoughts on the matter, if you wouldn't mind." Olivia said carefully.

Little Joe flashed an aggravated look at his mother, but didn't say anything.

"Of course, I'll do whatever I can." Rafe said as he devoted his full attention to her.

"Little Joe was able to finish high school early. He graduated a few months ago. We sent him to spend time with his grandparents hoping that they could convince him of the importance of a college education." Olivia said seriously.

"You don't want to go to college?" Rafe asked Little Joe curiously.

After a moment of squirming, Little Joe reluctantly said, "I wouldn't mind going to college. I mean, I was able to finish a semester early, so I should be smart enough. I guess I just don't want to go to college just to go. I want to know what I'm going for."

"So you'd like to take some time to determine where your interests lie before you commit yourself to a field of study?" Rafe asked carefully, to confirm.

"Yeah." Little Joe said with surprise at the accurate summary of his feelings. "I know I can take the basic classes for a year or two before I have to choose a major, but how am I going to know what I want to do if all I've ever done is study?"

"Dodger is in a similar situation. He just recently graduated high school... a year early." Rafe said with a proud smile at Dodger, then continued, "We've talked about him going to college, but then I was called away to New Mexico and we haven't discussed it since. I suppose that I'll be available if and when he wants to discuss it. I'll give him the benefit of my insights and then he'll make the decision that's best for him."

Little Joe considered Rafe's words for a moment, then turned to his mother and said, "Mom, when I was on the plane, I nearly died. If I had, one of the things that I would have regretted was us being mad at each other over something that's really not that important. I'm going to go to college, just maybe not right away. I'd like to get a job and get a feeling for what I'm good at. Once I've figured that out, then I can go to college or a trade school or whatever it takes."

"It might also be a good experience for Little Joe to see what limitations he has with only a high school education." Rafe said seriously.

Olivia reluctantly nodded her agreement.

John turned to his daughter and quietly said, "I know you only want what's best for the boy, but he's come to the age where it's his decision to make. Now, if he starts lazing around the house, being useless, you'll have our full support in kicking his little keister until he gets some sense. But as long as he's working toward something and trying to figure things out, I think we should allow him the freedom to make his own decisions."

"Thanks, Dad. I just don't want for him to have any regrets later because we didn't push him to achieve more." Olivia said quietly.

"Do you regret that we didn't push you more?" John asked his daughter as he looked her in the eyes.

"I didn't mean that!" Olivia sputtered.

"I know you didn't. But, do you regret that we didn't encourage you to go to college?" John asked his daughter curiously.

Olivia glanced at Little Joe as her look became tender and she said, "No. I don't regret anything."

* * * * *

"Will you have time to stay for a cup of coffee after dinner?" John asked as he stood from his place at the table.

"We should probably be going soon." Rafe said consideringly, then looked at Dodger with question.

"Before you go, there's something I want to show you, Dodger." Little Joe said quickly.

"Why don't you have coffee while I go with Little Joe?" Dodger asked with a smile.

Rafe noticed Little Joe's hopeful expression, then looked at Dodger and nodded.

* * * * *

As Dodger and Little Joe walked onto the porch, Dodger looked around curiously.

"I remember everything." Little Joe said as he stopped to look Dodger in the eyes.

"About what?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"I promise that I haven't told anyone about you, and I never will. But I know what I saw. I remember every bit of it. You're an angel." Little Joe said seriously.

Dodger didn't know how to react and briefly wished that Rafe were there with him to handle the situation.

Finally, Dodger came to a decision, then looked around.

"I didn't know how much you'd remember." Dodger said absently as he started walking toward the driveway.

"You really are an angel, aren't you?" Little Joe asked hopefully as he followed.

Dodger led Little Joe around the side of the garage, then looked to see if they were within view of any of the neighbors.

Once he was reasonably assured that they were out of sight, Dodger consciously allowed himself to start glowing.

Little Joe's eyes went wide as he stared at Dodger.

For the first time, Dodger allowed the glowing sensation to go without restraint, enjoying the warm tingle that washed over him.

His voice seemed to echo slightly as he said, "Enjoy your family and love your life."

"I will." Little Joe whispered as he looked at the glowing halo and the wings spread out, displaying transparent veins of light.

"Only a few special people know about us. Remember your promise." Dodger said as he looked Little Joe in the eyes.

Little Joe slightly nodded as tears of joy started sliding down his cheeks.

Dodger took a step forward and gave Little Joe a firm hug and finished by giving him a kiss on the cheek.

By the time they separated, Dodger's glow had faded and he looked like an average teenager.

"I love you." Little Joe barely whispered.

"I love you, too, Little Joe. Remember that Rafe and I will always be there if you need us. All you have to do is call." Dodger said quietly.

Little Joe seemed to be frozen in thought for a moment, then hesitantly smiled and nodded.

"Rafe and I need to be going, now." Dodger said gently as he put an arm around Little Joe's shoulders.

"I don't want you to go." Little Joe said as he started to slowly walk back toward the front of the house.

"I know. I feel the same way. But no matter how we feel about it, we have to do what we have to do." Dodger said honestly.

"I can really call you?" Little Joe asked cautiously.

"Yes. Whenever you want. In fact, I want to hear all about it when you've decided what you want to do about college or a job." Dodger said as they walked past the front of the garage.

"Yeah. Me too. I mean, was that true what Rafe said about you being the same as me?" Little Joe rambled with renewed energy.

"Yes. I just graduated high school right before we left for New Mexico and I haven't decided what I'm going to do next." Dodger said with a smile.

"Okay. Then I want to know what you decide. And if you can't decide, I want you to call me so, maybe, if you want, we can try to figure it out together." Little Joe said hopefully.

"It's a deal." Dodger said with a grin at Little Joe's enthusiasm as they walked up to the front door.

* * * * *

"Are you about ready to go?" Rafe asked as he set his coffee cup aside and stood.

"Sure. Ready when you are." Dodger said as he and Little Joe walked into the living room.

"Wait a minute!" Little Joe said as he dashed away.

"Thank you for having dinner with us. It means a lot to us that we had a chance to thank you in person." Olivia said quietly.

"We would have helped anyone in that situation, but I'm glad that we ended up helping someone as good and decent as Little Joe. I know that you must be very proud of him." Rafe said warmly.

"Here!" Little Joe called as he ran back into the room carrying a slip of paper.

Dodger accepted the paper with a phone number written on it.

"Let me give you mine..." Dodger said as he patted his pockets to see if he had a pen.

"Take this." Rafe said as he handed a business card to Little Joe.

"The bottom number is our home number." Rafe said with a smile.

"Thanks." Little Joe said happily.

"Thank you, all of you, for inviting us to dinner. We've had a wonderful evening of good food and good company." Rafe said as he started toward the door.

"If you ever find yourself in the area, be sure to stop in and see us." John said as he stood to walk with them.

"I can never tell where my work is going to take me, so I might just do that." Rafe said as he pulled on his coat and gloves.

In a much quieter voice, John said, "And thank you for what you said in there. Olivia needed to hear that... and I think Little Joe did, too."

"Glad to help." Rafe said as he shook John's hand.

John then turned his attention to Dodger and said, "I'm glad my grandson has had the chance to make a new friend. I worry about him being around those California types."

"I hope you don't have anything against West Virginia types." Dodger said with a playful grin.

John chuckled, then said, "No. No. Some of my best friends are West Virginians."

"It was nice meeting all of you." Dodger said as he shook John's hand, then waved at Little Joe before walking to the car to join Rafe.

* * * * *

"It was nice to see Little Joe and his family together. They're how I've always imagined a family should be." Dodger said distantly.

"So your family isn't like that?" Rafe asked in a casual tone.

"No. I mean, I love them... I guess. But I can't say it to them or show them, because they never said it or showed it to me." Dodger said with difficulty.

As Rafe navigated the maddening jumble of winding streets through town, he quietly said, "I don't know if you've thought about this, but if you want to take any steps to resolve things with your family, you're going to need to do it soon."

Dodger didn't respond other than to look at him curiously.

"You don't age. They do. As time passes, it will become increasingly difficult for you to have any contact with them." Rafe said honestly.

Dodger nodded at the statement.

"One of the most poisonous things for a shadesider is regret. Think about how you'll feel five hundred years from now, if you don't make the effort to resolve things with your family while you've still got the chance." Rafe said as he kept his attention on the road.

"But I won't know what to say to them." Dodger said in a small voice.

"I don't know what actual words you'll say, but in your heart, you'll be saying 'goodbye'." Rafe said quietly.

Dodger turned and looked at him suddenly.

"You ran away from home. So I'm assuming that you've never told them about what you're feeling or how you feel about what they did to you. This is your chance to say what needs to be said. How much or how little you say is going to be up to you, but I just think it's important for you to speak your piece and then walk out of there with your head held high." Rafe said frankly.

"Okay. You're probably right. I'll think about it." Dodger said quietly.

"You'd better think quick. We'll be crossing the Ohio River into West Virginia in about twenty minutes." Rafe said frankly.

"We're going NOW?" Dodger asked in panic.

"No time like the present." Rafe said with a slight grin at Dodger.

"But it's too late to visit..." Dodger feebly protested.

"It's not really that late. Besides, I don't anticipate it being a very long visit." Rafe said honestly.

"I don't think I'm ready for this." Dodger said with a note of dread in his voice.

"Do you 'honestly' think it's going to get easier if you put it off?" Rafe asked seriously.

After a moment to consider the question, Dodger reluctantly shook his head.

"Dodger, remember that no matter what horrible things they say or what they try to do, that I loved you yesterday, I love you today, and I will continue to love you forever." Rafe said firmly.

"I don't want to do this." Dodger said quietly.

"I know." Rafe said regretfully, then quietly asked, "But you're going to do it anyway, aren't you?"

"Yeah." Dodger whispered with resignation.

* * * * *

"You're going to need to give me some directions. I got us to West Virginia, but from here on out you're going to have to tell me where to go."

"Yeah. Well, it's not like I've ever driven it either. But if we can find highway eighty-eight, I can get us the rest of the way there." Dodger said apologetically.

"I have an atlas in the glove box. Why don't you get it out and see if you can figure out where we need to go? If not, I'll stop at a filling station and buy a map." Rafe said seriously.

Dodger nodded, then opened the glove compartment.

* * * * *

"Are we close?" Rafe asked as he saw the untamed landscape of West Virginia speeding by outside the car.

"Not far." Dodger said nervously.

"That's what you said a half an hour ago." Rafe said as he glanced at Dodger.

"It's more true now than it was then." Dodger said as he looked out the window.

"I love you." Rafe said gently.

"Me, too." Dodger said absently, then said, "I mean, you. You know what I mean."

"Yes. I do." Rafe said with a gentle smile, then added, "And I know that you mean it."

"Yeah. I do." Dodger said softly, then quickly said, "Here it is, you need to turn right."

Rafe slowed the car and turned down a much smaller road.

"You know, after doing all this, I think you deserve a treat." Rafe said as he carefully drove the winding, unfamiliar road.

"A treat?" Dodger asked and seemed to perk up.

"Yes. What would you like to do when we get home tonight... or tomorrow morning." Rafe asked curiously.

"You mean 'anything'? Like this morning?" Dodger asked with a smile.

"Yes. That's what I mean. Except that now you have time to think about it and make detailed plans. What do you think you would like to do?" Rafe asked with a lecherous grin.

"Slow down." Dodger said simply.

"What?" Rafe asked with surprise.

"You're coming to a hairpin turn, you need to slow down." Dodger said somewhat urgently.

As Rafe let off the gas pedal, he saw what Dodger was talking about.

They drove in silence for the next few minutes as Rafe slowly drove on the narrow and incredibly curvy road.

* * * * *

"There's a dirt road just past that big rock, you'll need to turn in there." Dodger said as he pointed ahead of them.

Rafe slowed to nearly a stop before he spotted what was little more than a goat path that disappeared into the dense trees.

"I don't think this is what they had in mind when they designed this car." Rafe said tensely as he fought to stay on what was, by some definitions, a road.

"You'll need to turn right at the cemetery." Dodger said as he pointed ahead of them.

"What is it with West Virginia? I've never seen a place with so many cemeteries." Rafe said as he carefully turned and found that there wasn't anything that could be considered a road ahead of him.

"Yeah. There's probably more West Virginians horizontal than there are vertical." Dodger said with a grin, then pointed and said, "Drive between those trees over there and the road picks up on the other side."

"You weren't kidding when you said you lived up in the hills." Rafe said as he cautiously drove through the tall grass.

"This is the metro area." Dodger chuckled.

* * * * *

"Keep going." Dodger said as Rafe slowed the car.

"Across the stream?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"Yeah, it's only about an inch deep at this part." Dodger said seriously.

"Please tell me that we're almost to your family's house."

"Not far." Dodger said absently.

Rafe spared him a glance before directing his full attention forward.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry Dodger, but there's no way I'm driving across THAT." Rafe said as he pulled the car to a stop.

"That's fine. The house is just up this hill and around the bend. We can walk from here." Dodger said as he unlatched his seat-belt.

"So, this is where you grew up?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"That's right." Dodger said as he led the way toward the rickety wooden bridge.

"How safe is this?" Rafe asked as he looked ten feet down into a riverbed.

"Safe enough to drive across. Come on." Dodger said as he started across the uneven wood slats.

Rafe followed immediately behind, but had the sense that the boards could give way with every step.

* * * * *

"There it is." Dodger said as they climbed a rather steep path up the hill.

When Rafe saw the shanty on the hillside, he suddenly realized that Dodger hadn't been exaggerating when he described his family's humble home.

Even in the meager moonlight, Rafe could tell that the small house probably hadn't seen a coat of paint in about forty years. The wood was weather worn and looked as though a stiff breeze would cause the entire thing to collapse in on itself.

Before they had even stepped onto the warped and weathered porch, Rafe caught the unmistakable scent of unwashed bodies.

"Oh, man!" Dodger said as he stopped and cringed away.

"Remember, we won't be staying." Rafe said gently.

Dodger took in a deep breath of clean, fresh air to brace himself, then walked up to the door.

* * * * *

After Dodger knocked on the door, he looked at Rafe with concern.

"I'm here with you." Rafe said gently.

Dodger nodded, then turned suddenly when the door opened.

"Hi, Donna." Dodger said quietly, but made no move to enter.

"It's Desi!" Donna called as she turned and walked back into the house.

Rafe looked at Dodger curiously, but could tell that Dodger was still bracing himself for the worst of it.

"Desi? What'ch'a doin here?" A short stout woman asked as she waddled toward the door.

By Rafe's estimation, she was probably as big around as she was tall. She also had a respectable mustache and the beginning of a beard, with several long gray whiskers on her chins.

"Hi Ma. I'd like you to meet Rafe." Dodger said quietly.

The woman glanced at Rafe, then turned her full attention to Dodger and said, "Ya best be on yer guard with Pa. He wont none too pleased when ya up and left like ya did."

"I know. That's why I'm here now." Dodger said honestly, then explained, "I couldn't face him then, but Rafe made me realize that things wouldn't be right until I came here and talked to him."

"Well then, ya'd best come in and git on with it." Dodgers mother said and finished with a sigh.

As she waddled into the house, Dodger followed immediately behind her and Rafe followed a few steps back.

* * * * *

When Rafe walked into the main room of the house, he realized that the entire family appeared to be present.

The stench in the air was nearly unbearable, but he put that out of his mind as he tried to gauge the attitudes of Dodger's siblings.

The range of emotions seemed to run from disinterest to annoyance.

"Fuck, boy. You ain't here 'spectin to move in on us, are ya?" A low, husky voice dripping with disgust asked.

Rafe looked at Dodger's father and was surprised to see that he was a tall, gaunt figure of a man. Somehow, Rafe had pictured Dodger's father to be muscular, or at least overweight.

"No, Pa. We were just in the neighborhood, so I thought I'd stop by to let you know that I'm doing okay." Dodger said simply.

"So you went to tha big city and now yous here ta rub ar noses in it, huh?" Dodger's father sneered.

"No. I just felt bad about leavin tha way I did. It was cowardly. So I came back to set things right, if I can." Dodger said in a firm, steady tone.

"Who's this here, then?" Dodger's father asked as he looked at Rafe.

"A friend. His name is Rafe." Dodger said in a slow, neutral tone.

Dodger's father made a show of looking Rafe up and down, then seemed to come to a decision before saying, "I see."

Rafe looked at Dodger's father uncertainly, and was on guard, ready to defend himself.

"I heard 'bout men like you. Git outta my house and take that little faggot whore with you."

"Pa!" Dodger's mother gasped.

"I don't know who ya was sleepin with, but that's no son of mine." Dodger's father said to his wife.

"You know what? If you say I ain't your son, that's fine! You're no kin of mine either. But I grew up under your roof, so I figured I owed it to you to come back here and let you know how I'm doing. By the way, I'm fine. I'm happy. If that doesn't mean anything to you, that's not my problem." Dodger said on the verge of rage.

"Git out!" Dodger's father said without wavering.

Dodger looked around the room at all the frozen faces and finally said, "It's good to see all of you again. I hope all of you have good and happy lives."

As Dodger turned, Rafe put a hand on his shoulder and walked with him to the door.

* * * * *

"That derned fool don't know what he's talkin 'bout. You're his son. Ain't no doubt 'bout it." Dodger's mother said as she waddled onto the porch.

"Thanks, Ma." Dodger said as he leaned down to give her a hug.

"Now, tha other ten... them I can't be so sure 'bout."

"Ma!" Dodger gasped as he pulled back to look her in the eyes.

"I'm just funnin. I ain't never slept with no man but your Pa." She said with a mischievous grin.

Dodger gave her a slight smile and nodded.

"Don't'cha be worryin 'bout what yer Pa said in there. Ya said ya was happy. That's all I ever wanted fer my little Dodger and it's more than I could expect." She said seriously then looked at Rafe and continued, "Y'all go on, now. And don't look back."

Dodger felt the tears falling down his cheeks and finally managed to say, "Thanks, Ma."

She made a shooing motion, then turned and waddled back into the house.

* * * * *

"Are you alright?" Rafe asked as they slowly walked down the hill.

"Yeah." Dodger said as he held close to Rafe's side, then added, "Thanks for talking me into coming here."

"I suppose it could have gone worse, although I'm hard pressed to imagine how." Rafe said as he returned Dodger's hug.

"All I know is that I feel like I did everything that I needed to do. I can leave here without any regrets." Dodger said frankly.

"That's what all of this was about." Rafe said warmly.

* * * * *

As they approached the car, Rafe stopped at the sight of someone leaning against the driver's side door.

"Duncan?" Dodger asked as he pulled away from Rafe and ran toward the car.

"Desi? Is that you?" Duncan asked as he fumbled to turn on his flashlight.

"Yeah. What are you doing here?" Dodger asked as he ran up to his brother just as the flashlight came on.

"After what Pa said, I just wanted ta come down here an tell ya how sorry I am 'bout... well, pretty much everything." Duncan said quietly.

"You don't have to..." Dodger began to say.

"Yes. I do." Duncan interrupted, then continued, "I'm sorry fer what Pa said. I'm sorry fer tha way tha rest of us treated ya. And, mostly, I'm sorry fer everythin I ever did ta make ya feel bad. I got no excuse fer it. I'm just sorry." Duncan said as he looked Dodger in the eyes.

"It's okay, Duncan. I was never mad at you. But just in case you need to hear it, I forgive you." Dodger said seriously.

Duncan smiled and said, "Thanks, Desi. Ya know, out of all of us, I never figured you'd be tha one who'd make it."

"Make what?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Make it out of here. Git away from all this." Duncan said frankly.

"Duncan." Rafe said to get his attention.

After a moment to turn the flashlight so he could see, Duncan looked at Rafe with question.

"Get in." Rafe said simply.

"What?" Duncan asked in confusion.

"We're leaving. What do you say?" Rafe asked with a smile.

Duncan looked at Rafe in shock, then looked at his brother with question.

Dodger smiled and nodded.

Duncan looked at Rafe uncertainly for a moment, then glanced at Dodger before reaching down and opening the car door.

The End...

...Of Part 3

...Of Book 1

...But not the story.

Part 4: In the Dark

Chapter 15

"He's slipping in and out of consciousness."

"All things considered, that might be a mercy."

"This is a nightmare. Who would believe that this could happen in the year 2013? This is something out of the frontier days... or the middle ages. I can't imagine what kind of monster did that to him and his mom."

"I just hope they can find it and kill it, before we have more patients like this."

"I'd better get back out there; I have a feeling that it's going to be a busy night."

"For us, too."

* * * * *

The boy drifted back to consciousness, feeling like he was somehow floating above it all.

Memories meandered before his mind's eye. Although he knew that some of the images were horrifying and held incredible pain, he looked upon them now like someone watching a horror movie on DVD for the tenth time.

Watching the insane man attack his mother and literally rip her throat out with his teeth. Then watching as the same man chased and stalked, and eventually caught up to him.

He recalled the moment of acceptance he had felt, when he knew that he was going to die. But the moment didn't come, or, at least, it hadn't yet.

Just as the insane beast of a man bit into his flesh, there were two other people there, fighting off his attacker and pulling him away.

The next thing he remembered was the ambulance arriving and being transported to the hospital, where he was, now... whenever now was, since any concept of time had left him, the first time that he had passed out.

* * * * *

"Hold still." A feminine voice, close to his ear, said.

Although Evan heard the words, somehow they didn't seem to have any meaning to him. He still felt distant and more like an observer than a participant in the events that were going on around him.

"Your ID says that your name is Evan. Is that the name that you go by?" The feminine voice asked gently.

Again, the words slid by him. He barely grasped their meaning and felt no desire to respond.

"The doctor is fixing your shoulder right now. So there's nothing for you to worry about. Just hold on for a few more minutes and he'll be finished." The voice said, then a woman moved into his field of vision.

She was mostly hidden behind a surgical mask, but her kind eyes relayed her concern for him.

Evan felt an involuntary smile cross his face for an instant.

"Good. You're going to be fine." The woman said with relief when she saw his reaction.

Once again, the nightmarish scene from earlier in the evening filled his mind's eye. His mother's howl of pain, then the hideous silence that followed. The monstrous man/thing that stalked him and the searing pain as the sharp teeth invaded his flesh.

His thoughts were little more than a blurry haze at that moment, but one thing seemed to be certain to him. No matter what happened next, he knew without a doubt that he would NOT be fine.

The world began to spin around him and his eyes fell closed as he felt consciousness once again slip away.

* * * * *

"I need to evaluate the patient, Evan Delgado." a man in a very nice business suit said authoritatively, as he walked into the emergency room and directly to the desk.

"And you would be...?" the nurse asked in an impatient tone as she spared him a glance.

"Dr. Killian, on special assignment from the CDC. I need to see the patient, NOW. Time is an issue." Dr. Killian said firmly as he held out his ID.

"Dr. Willoughby! I think you need to speak to this man!" The nurse said, as she ushered Dr. Killian past the desk and through a curtain, then quickly added, "He says he's from the CDC."

"Molly..." the ER doctor said, then froze at the expression on Dr. Killian's face.

"I need to evaluate Evan Delgado immediately. This may be quite a bit more serious than you realize." Dr. Killian said firmly.

"He's right here, we're still trying to sort out who or what it was that attacked him, but we just finished patching him up." Dr. Willoughby said cautiously.

Dr. Killian looked at the young teenage boy on the bed and seemed to take in every detail with just a glance.

"Not good." Dr. Killian said grimly, more to himself than those around him.

"Is something wrong?" Dr. Willoughby asked with confusion.

"I'm getting ahead of myself. It may be nothing." Dr. Killian said thoughtfully, then turned to Dr. Willoughby and said, "I need for you to draw some blood for me. There's a chance that when your patient was attacked, that he was exposed to a new strain of an extremely infectious virus."

"Claire? Would you get a blood sample?" Dr. Willoughby asked immediately.

The nurse nodded and gathered what she would need.

When she approached the boy's bedside, she noticed that he was awake and quietly asked, "How are you feeling, now?"

Evan felt more aware than earlier and opened his mouth to answer, but no sound came out. It seemed to him that he had just, all of a sudden, forgotten how to talk. He didn't feel any sense of panic or even the slightest worry about the new development. But for whatever reason, he simply couldn't recall how to form words.

"We need to get a listing of everyone who has had even the briefest physical contact with the patient. That includes police, paramedics, and any civilian who might have tried to help." Dr. Killian said firmly, drawing both Evan and the nurse's attention.

Evan puzzled over the sensation of tears falling down his cheeks. His detached mind reasoned that crying was a perfectly reasonable response to what had just happened to him, but at the same time, he just felt emotionally numb. He wasn't exactly feeling anything, but he reasoned that maybe some deeper part of him, that he wasn't aware of, needed to cry to deal with things.

"Doctor!" The nurse called in panic as she scrambled back from the bed.

Both doctors turned to the nurse and followed her horrified gaze to find the teenage boy with tears of blood running down his cheeks.

"Damn!" Dr. Killian muttered to himself, then said to the people around him, "I've seen all that I need to. I'm making the call. He doesn't have time to wait for a blood test. We need to get him to where he can receive proper treatment."

"What do you think he has?" Dr. Willoughby asked in a whisper.

Dr. Killian shook his head as he pulled a cell phone from his pocket. He pressed one button and waited just a moment before saying, "I need med-evac from Women's and Children's, immediately. I'm confirming Bolivian Hemorrhagic Ebola. Bring in a team for full decontamination and follow-up."

The ER doctor's eyes went wide at the pronouncement.

"I also need a full team brought in to track down the carrier. If you don't have enough manpower to do it yourselves, then get the locals involved. Just make sure that they are aware that they're dealing with an extremely contagious strain... no, make that an INSANELY contagious strain of the virus."

The ER doctor seemed to be pale and was nearly speechless.

"Right." Dr. Killian said into the phone, then flipped it shut.

"I need to speak to the patient's parent or guardian." Dr. Killian said to the stunned ER doctor and nurse standing before him.

"I, um... We can't find any next of kin for him. His mother was killed in the attack." The nurse stammered with distraction.

Dr. Killian flashed a look of sympathy at the boy on the bed, then turned with renewed dedication and said, "Let's get him up to the helipad. Every second counts, right now."

The ER doctor immediately raced away to arrange transport.

Evan looked with wide terrified eyes at Dr. Killian, leaning over his bed.

"Hang on for just a few more minutes, and we'll get you taken care of. I promise." Dr. Killian whispered with a tender smile.

Evan was strangely assured, not so much by the words, but by the absolute self-confidence of the man.

It wasn't like he was saying the empty words just to be kind. The tone of his voice was more like he was telling a secret, something that no one else knew and that he was absolutely certain was true.

"Thanks." Evan whispered, then marveled that his ability to speak had returned.

"Just hang in there." Dr. Killian whispered gently as he patted Evan on his uninjured shoulder.

"Your helicopter just signaled that they'll be ready to land in two minutes." Dr. Willoughby said as he raced into the room with two orderlies.

"Let's get him up there. I have a team on the way to deal with the quarantine and decontamination. Please, keep anyone who has had contact with this patient isolated until they get here and have cleared you."

"Yes. Of course." Dr. Willoughby stammered.

Evan winced as he was shifted from his bed onto a gurney.

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"He's locked in." One of the orderlies said as he withdrew from the helicopter.

"Then we're gone." Dr. Killian said as he climbed into the helicopter and sat in the seat beside the gurney. As soon as the door of the helicopter had been closed, he made a hand motion toward the pilot to lift off.

Evan was surprised by the look of concern on Dr. Killian's face, then his attention was diverted by the sound and sensation of the helicopter lifting into the air.

"Bruce, help me sit him up." Dr. Killian said as he reached into a small ice chest and pulled out a plastic bag, like the type they use for IVs.

Evan turned to see who Dr. Killian was talking to and found another man, probably about thirty years old, belted into a seat on the other side of the bed.

"Seriously?" Bruce asked as he looked at the bag.

"There's no time for second guessing. Sit him up." Dr. Killian said as he snipped the top off the IV bag.

Evan winced from the pain that the movement caused. The wounds in his neck and shoulder were deep and complained at the disturbance.

"Are you going to want me to call Leila?" Bruce asked cautiously.

"No. Call Dodger. Have him meet us in my office." Dr. Killian said, as he poured the contents of the IV bag into a large plastic cup.

Evan looked at the man, Bruce, to find a disbelieving look frozen on his face.

"I need for you to drink this, Evan. It's going to make you feel better." Dr. Killian said gently, as he held the cup to Evan's lips.

Evan hesitated for a moment, feeling that something really strange was going on around him. But one look into Dr. Killian's eyes convinced him that no matter what else was going on, Dr. Killian was going to try to help him.

Bruce and Dr. Killian watched as Evan drank down the entire cup of yellow-orange liquid.

"Good." Dr. Killian said with relief.

"You're sure about this, Rafe? I mean about Dodger." Bruce asked cautiously.

"Absolutely." Dr. Killian said as he looked into Bruce's eyes.

"Right, then." Bruce said with resignation, then continued, "I'd better make that call. We should be landing in about five minutes."

Dr. Killian scooted over in his chair a little and started to look at Evan's wounds.

"Am I going to die?" Evan asked in a whisper.

Dr. Killian looked up with surprise at the question, then his look softened.

"Earlier tonight, when you were attacked, there was a very good chance that you would die. In the hospital, before I arrived, there was still a better than average chance that you would die. Now... let's just say that things are improving for you, and leave it at that." Dr. Killian said gently.

Evan nodded slowly, then realized that the movement didn't cause him pain. In fact, the wound in his neck wasn't hurting at all.

As he reached to investigate, Dr. Killian caught his hand and prevented him.

"You need to leave it alone for a few more minutes." Dr. Killian said quietly.

"Okay." Evan responded, then noticed that Dr. Killian was still holding his hand.

As Evan looked into Dr. Killian's eyes, he saw a look of tenderness there that he couldn't account for, but also noticed that Dr. Killian's hand was unusually cold..

"Evan, in the next few days things may be a little bit strange for you." Dr. Killian said with concern.

"A little bit?" Evan asked cautiously.

Dr. Killian reluctantly smiled, then mock whispered, "Maybe more than a little bit."

Evan slowly nodded that he understood.

Dr. Killian started undoing the straps that held Evan on the gurney.

"You should be able to walk by the time we've landed."

* * * * *

Evan got down off the gurney with Dr. Killian's help. He felt slightly lightheaded but not so much that he was unable to walk.

"How can I even be..." Evan began to ask, then lost the thread of his thought when he noticed his surroundings.

There were trees and rolling hills as far as the eye could see in every direction. But before Evan could get over the surprise, Dr. Killian ushered him into an elevator.

"Evan, I really wish I could explain everything to you. But there just isn't time right now." Dr. Killian said regretfully. "But if you'll trust me for just a little bit longer, I'm going to introduce you to someone who can, and will, answer all your questions."

After a moment to consider, Evan looked into Dr. Killian's eyes and nodded his agreement.

Dr. Killian smiled and placed his hand on Evan's uninjured shoulder in a way that seemed more personal than professional. Evan got the sense that Dr. Killian really cared not only about his physical state, but also about how he was dealing with things.

"There's someone I want you to meet." Dr. Killian said, as they walked off the elevator.

Evan looked around and was amazed by the enormous room they were in. This wasn't like any medical facility he had seen or ever heard about. If he had to compare it to something, it would be a movie set from the 1930's. He almost expected Fred and Ginger to come waltzing into the room at any moment.

The curved staircase drew his attention upward, where he could see a walkway surrounding the room. And above them was an astoundingly beautiful crystal chandelier. Evan had to wonder even more about what strange thing he had gotten into.

Before he could think too much about it, Dr. Killian ushered him through a door.

* * * * *

"Morgan." A teenage boy said as he held out a phone.

Dr. Killian winced, then looked at Evan with equal measures of frustration and regret before accepting the phone.

"Hey, I'm Dodger." The boy said as he walked past Dr. Killian and extended his hand to shake.

"Dodger?" Evan asked dubiously as he shook the offered hand.

"Well, Desmond, actually. But everyone calls me Dodger." The older teenager said timidly.

Evan smiled, then responded, "It's nice to meet you Dodger, my name is Evan Delgado."

"Como estas usted?" Dodger asked pleasantly.

"Um... gesundheit?" Evan ventured weakly.

Dodger chuckled and asked, "You don't speak Spanish, huh?"

"Not a word. I got the look, I got the name, but I never learned to speak the language." Evan said regretfully.

"Let's sit down. It looks like Rafe may be a few minutes." Dodger said as he gestured to the other side of the room where there was a coffee table and some low cushioned chairs.

As Evan walked toward the lounge area, he suddenly realized that he was only wearing a hospital gown.

"I, um..." Evan said as he looked down at himself.

"Sorry Evan, I should have thought of that. Hang on for a second and I'll be right back." Dodger said, then dashed away, not waiting for Evan's response.

Evan turned his attention to Dr. Killian who was still talking on the phone.

"I need five minutes to get Dodger squared away, then I'll be on my way to handle it personally." Dr. Killian was saying firmly.

He seemed to wince a little, then said, "I'll make it two. Just consider me on my way."

There was a pause, then Dr. Killian said, "Right." then hung up the phone.

After a moment to gather himself, Dr. Killian looked around the room, then asked, "Where's Dodger?"

"I think he went to get me some clothes." Evan said shyly.

Dr. Killian nodded, then said, "I'm going to have to leave. Listen to what Dodger tells you, and I'll see you again as soon as I can."

Before Evan could answer, Dodger dashed back into the room.

"These should fit you." Dodger said quickly, then noticed that Dr. Killian was off the phone.

Dodger immediately went to Dr. Killian and hugged him firmly.

"I have to go and try to sort out this mess. I haven't explained anything to Evan." Dr. Killian said with regret.

"I'll handle it. Go do what you need to do." Dodger said with assurance.

"Are you okay with this? We can still call Leila to do it." Dr. Killian said gently.

"If you're okay, then I'm okay. This is what I've been training for. Don't worry about me, just go make the world safe." Dodger finished with a smile.

"I love you." Dr. Killian whispered.

"I love you, too." Dodger said quietly, then moved in for a full, deep kiss.

Evan knew that what he was seeing was a very personal and private moment, yet he couldn't seem to force himself to look away.

"If I don't get out of here right now, Morgan is going to have my balls for breakfast." Dr. Killian said with weak humor.

"Well, we can't have that. I have plans for them later." Dodger said with a grin, then gave Dr. Killian one little peck of a kiss before saying, "Go."

* * * * *

Evan followed Dodger's gaze toward the door that Dr. Killian had just passed through.

Finally, Dodger gave a resigned sigh and turned his attention to Evan.

"I hope this will be okay for now. We'll get you something better later on." Dodger said as he walked to Evan and handed him a pair of navy blue sweatpants and a plain white t shirt.

"This will be fine." Evan said, then quickly stepped into the sweatpants.

"Before you put on the t shirt, let me take care of those bandages." Dodger said as he stepped closer.

Evan finished taking off the hospital gown, then held still as Dodger slowly peeled back the pieces of tape that were holding an assortment of gauze pads in place.

Dodger made a little wince at the sight, then said, "Hold on, I need to deal with these stitches."

Evan watched as Dodger walked to the large dark wood desk that dominated the room and retrieved a small pair of scissors.

"If I can get these things out now, it'll save you some discomfort later." Dodger said as he walked to Evan again.

"Didn't they put the stitches there for a reason?" Evan asked hesitantly as he held perfectly still.

"Yes. And under normal circumstances, that would have been the right thing to do." Dodger said in a voice of deep concentration. Then Evan felt as well as heard a little 'snip'.

"But if everything goes right, your whole concept of 'normal circumstances' is about to be drastically changed." Dodger said, then made a couple more little snips.

"This is going to feel a little bit weird, but it shouldn't hurt." Dodger said as he looked Evan in the eyes.

Evan waited for a moment, but Dodger didn't do anything but continue to look at him expectantly.

"Okay." Evan said cautiously. "Just do what you need to do."

Dodger smiled at the response, then began to pull on one of the small pieces of thread.

Evan felt the pulling sensation, and felt when the thread came free but, as Dodger had said, there wasn't any pain.

He held perfectly still as Dodger pulled more of the little pieces of thread free.

"That should be good enough for now." Dodger said happily. "You can put that t shirt on if you want, and I'll take you downstairs where we can be more comfortable. I bet you have about a million questions."

"At least." Evan said, then hesitantly reached up to feel his neck and shoulder.

For a moment he couldn't believe what he was feeling, he ran his fingertips over smooth, undamaged skin.

"Yeah. I know." Dodger said with a grin, then cocked his head in a motion to indicate the door.

Evan quickly pulled the t shirt on over his head, then hurried to Dodger's side, catching up with him just as he was leaving the office.

* * * * *

Dodger had led him through a door under the curved staircase and led him down to the basement.

When Evan arrived at the bottom of the stairs, he looked around curiously.

The room was large. Huge, in fact.

One corner of the cavernous space was furnished very modestly with what looked like comfortable furniture.

"Are you thirsty?" Dodger asked as he walked across the room at a casual pace.

"Yeah, a little." Evan said uncertainly.

"I know just the thing." Dodger said, then walked to a small refrigerator.

Evan watched curiously as Dodger poured two glasses of what seemed to be the same yellow-orange liquid that he had been given on the helicopter.

"I bet this will hit the spot." Dodger said as he handed one of the drinks to Evan, then gestured to a low vinyl couch.

Evan took the offered seat, then hesitantly took a drink. Even though it had a somewhat metallic taste, the drink had a certain mild sweetness that Evan found satisfying.

When he looked up, Dodger seemed to be waiting for his reaction.

"It's good. Thank you." Evan said quietly.

Dodger smiled, then took a sip of his own drink before saying, "Well, how would you like to do this? I can either answer your questions as you ask them, or I can give you the story and you can ask about whatever you don't understand as we go."

"I guess you'd better tell me the story. There's so much weird stuff going on right now, I don't think I know enough about what's going on to know which questions to ask." Evan said frankly.

Dodger smiled and said, "I think that that will be easier. Some people are just such control freaks that they have an emotional need to do it the other way."

Evan nodded slowly, then looked at Dodger with imploring eyes, willing him to start the story.

"Let's see... Have you ever wondered where all the stories about angels and demons and vampires came from?" Dodger asked carefully.

"Not really." Evan said weakly.

"Oh. Um... Well, you see, there's this thing. I guess brightsiders wouldÂ call it a disease." Dodger said slowly.

"What's a brightsider?" Evan asked quickly, feeling that he wasn't going to be able to follow Dodger's explanation unless he understood the basic terminology.

"What you were when you woke up this morning. That's a brightsider." Dodger said frankly.

"Does that mean that now I'm something else?" Evan asked slowly.

"Yes. At least, you're in the process of becoming something else." Dodger saidÂ carefully.

"What?" Evan asked hesitantly.

"Angel. Demon. Vampire. Something like that." Dodger said with an apologetic look.

After a moment to consider what Dodger was telling him, Evan finally said, "Okay. I think I'm ready for that story now."

* * * * *

"In the old times, everything that couldn't be explained was attributed to magic. So the darksiders and shadesiders were considered to be either holy or damned. Now we have a better understanding of how things work on a cellular level, so we tend to look at the transformative bio-organism as something more like a disease."

"Dr. Killian said something about, um... I forget what he called it, but I remember it sounded like that disease that causes you to bleed out really fast and really bad." Evan said hesitantly.

"Hemorrhagic Fever or Ebola." Dodger said with a nod. "Rafe uses that as a cover story when things look like they might go totally out of control. Most people will just back off and leave him to do whatever he needs to do after that. But you don't have it, so you don't need to worry about that at all."

Evan huffed a sigh of relief, then thought to ask, "So what's going to happen to me?"

"That's kind of hard to say at this point. It could go a few different ways." Dodger said hesitantly.

"Um, my mom was killed right in front of me tonight. Then some insane guy tried to chew through my throat. If you're about to tell me something worse than that, could you just say it so I can try to deal with it before everything else catches up to me?" Evan asked hopefully.

"I'm sorry to hear about your mom." Dodger said quietly, "I didn't know about that part."

Evan nodded, then looked at Dodger expectantly.

"Okay. Your body could reject the changes that are happening and you could just die."

"Please tell me you're not giving me the good news first." Evan said with a weak attempt at humor.

"No. I'm just telling you the possible outcomes that I know of. And I think if that was going to happen, you'd probably be writhing in pain on the floor right now." Dodger said frankly

"Okay. Death. That I understand." Evan said seriously. "What else have you got?"

"Well, there's a chance that the transformative will change you into what we call a darksider." Dodger said slowly.

"Which, I assume, is a *bad* thing." Evan said slowly.

"Yes. Because if that were to happen, only one of us would be leaving this room." Dodger said seriously.

"Which one?" Evan asked hesitantly.

"The one who survives. I'm kind of hoping it will be me." Dodger said honestly.

"I don't understand... Does that mean that I'd try to kill you?" Evan asked slowly.

"Yes. And you would do it with cruelty and delight." Dodger said regretfully.

"Why?" Evan asked slowly.

"We're not really sure exactly how everything works, but the popular belief is that it has something to do with the stimulation of certain centers in the brain during transformation. If you go through the transformation while you're in pain or mental anguish, then you're more likely to lose your 'humanity'. That's why vampires and demons were thought to have lost their souls."

"Okay. I think I've got that." Evan said slowly.

"Good. That leaves us with the preferred outcome, which is that you might become a shadesider, like me." Dodger finished with a smile.

"Okay. By process of elimination, I'm guessing that you're talking about an angel." Evan said slowly.

Dodger giggled, then said, "Yes. But don't expect to get any big fluffy wings out of the deal. None of these terms are exactly right, they're just close enough for you to get the idea. Physically, Shadesiders aren't any different from Darksiders. We were just able to retain our humanity through the transformation."

"So... to be a Shadesider, you do what? Feel happy when you're being transformed?" Evan asked cautiously.

"You have good reasoning skills." Dodger said with a smile, then said more seriously, "Unfortunately, it doesn't always work that way. Some people who are in horrible pain and anguish end up becoming Shadesiders and, sometimes, there are people who are comforted through the change who end up becoming Darksiders. We don't know why it works that way. We've just noticed that, in many cases, those who were helped through the change seem to have a better chance of retaining their humanity."

"So what do we have to do to make that happen?" Evan asked slowly.

"Well, when the second stage of transformation starts, I'm going to do my best to keep your mind off the discomfort of your body changing and maybe even make it a pleasant experience for you." Dodger said hesitantly.

"How?" Evan asked cautiously, feeling that Dodger was withholding some important fact.

"That's going to depend on you, and what you'll let me do." Dodger said, looking a little bit anxious.

"Such as." Evan said in a leading tone.

"Evan, I know you saw me with Rafe and have already realized what our relationship is." Dodger said seriously.

A nod was Evan's only answer.

"So please trust me when I say that I'll do whatever it takes to comfort you. I'll do whatever you want to make you feel safe and secure and to give you pleasure as you go through the transformation."

"But what about Dr... Um, Rafe? I mean, you love him, don't you?" Evan asked cautiously.

"Yes. More than I can say." Dodger answered immediately. "But if something were to happen between us, it wouldn't be a problem. I could love you too. It wouldn't be the same as what I feel for Rafe, but it would be real and forever. I would always look upon you as a dear and special friend."

"But is Rafe really okay with you doing this?" Evan asked uncertainly.

"That's why you're here. Rafe wants me to do this for you." Dodger said firmly. "I wouldn't even think about doing this with anyone unless Rafe approved."

"Okay. But why me, then? I mean, he only saw me in the hospital. He doesn't even know me." Evan said slowly.

"That, I don't know. You'll have to ask Rafe when he gets back." Dodger said frankly.

Evan nodded, then seemed to be lost in thought.

Dodger waited patiently as he watched Evan's expression carefully.

"So, let me see if I've got this straight." Evan said in prelude.

"The guy who attacked me and my mom, he was a darksider." Evan said slowly.

"Yes. I think that's reasonable to assume." Dodger said carefully.

"And somehow Rafe found out about me being attacked and went to the hospital so he could bring me here." Evan said thoughtfully.

"Rafe has people in place in the emergency services who will let him know if there's a suspicious attack so he can check it out and deal with it, if need be." Dodger said with a nod.

"And Rafe got me out of there so I wouldn't turn into a darksider right there in front of the doctors?" Evan asked cautiously.

"Yes and no. Just so you know, it would have been much easier for him to kill you there. There are about a dozen ways he could have done it and they never would have found out. He must have thought highly of you to go to all the effort to take you out of the hospital."

Evan slowly nodded, then reached over to the coffee table and picked up his glass. "What is this? Rafe gave me some of this in the helicopter on the way here and it seemed to start healing me within a few minutes."

"I think you'll be happier if I don't answer that question." Dodger said reluctantly.

Evan sniffed the drink, then took a small taste.

"It really isn't going to help you to be thinking about this while you're in transition." Dodger said anxiously.

"Before, you said vampires... it's blood, isn't it?" Evan asked slowly.

"No. At least, not really." Dodger said quickly.

"Then what is it. *Really*?" Evan asked slowly.

"It's a synthetic juice that contains the nutrition that we need." Dodger said desperately.

"Am I going to have to drink blood?"

After a moment of thought, Dodger quietly asked, "Do you like steak?"

"What?"

"You know, a big fat juicy steak. Is that something that you enjoy?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Yeah. Sure." Evan said slowly.

"What do you think would happen if you had steak for every meal, every day?" Dodger asked carefully.

"I'd probably get sick of it."

"You'd probably just get sick, period. Steak doesn't provide all the things your body needs to grow and thrive." Dodger said, sounding a bit calmer.

Evan considered for a moment, then nodded his agreement.

"So to answer your question. You'll probably have a taste for blood, I think most of us do. But if you have a moral problem with it, you don't ever have to drink blood at all. We have synthetic alternatives that are much healthier. While it's possible to feed exclusively on blood, it's not good for you. By the way, how are you feeling?"

"A little bit hungry. We were going home to have supper when..." Evan trailed off sadly.

"I'm really sorry about your mom, Evan." Dodger said quietly, then in a more detached voice he continued, "I could get you something to eat if you're really starving, but you're probably going to be throwing up in a little while, so the fewer solids you have now, the better."

"I'm going to throw up?" Evan asked uncomfortably.

"Probably." Dodger said, then got up and walked to the small refrigerator again.

After refilling both their glasses, he put away the juice and returned to the couch.

"You're in transition. That means that the transformative is working it's way through your body. Of course, your body is going to fight the change, so you're going to feel sick. Drinking this will help ease the discomfort, some. Other than hungry, how are you feeling?"

"I'm starting to feel a little bit hot." Evan said, only just noticing it.

"Let me see your hand." Dodger said and laid his hand out, open palm.

Evan laid his hand in Dodger's and noticed that it was cooler than his own.

He watched curiously as Dodger started to trace a pattern in his palm with his index finger.

"That tickles." Evan giggled.

Dodger smiled as he continued to trace the patterns.

"What are you doing?" Evan asked cautiously as he shifted in his seat. He was starting to get aroused.

"I'm stimulating you." Dodger said frankly.

"Oh?" Evan asked nervously as he tried to think of some way he could discretely adjust his erection.

"Like I said before, some people who come into contact with the transformative turn into monsters, like the one who attacked you and your mother." Dodger said carefully, then added, "If you get positively stimulated while you're in transition, you have a better chance of retaining your humanity."

"I don't see why." Evan said uncomfortably, not sure if he wanted to jerk his hand away from Dodger, or move closer so Dodger could stimulate more of him.

"Well, the transformative is working it's way through your body right now, permeating your tissues. When it really starts working on your nervous system, it's going to restructure the cells and change how they work." Dodger said carefully.

Evan nodded as he absently licked his dry lips.

"If we can keep you positively stimulated through the transition, you'll be more likely to retain your humanity. Your 'soul' for lack of a better term. It's like, in your new configuration, you'll be hardwired for pleasure and happiness." Dodger said carefully.

"So you just have to do that, what you're doing to my hand, for the next few hours, and I'll be fine?" Evan asked weakly.

"No Evan, this is to help you deal with the side effects. But this type of stimulation wouldn't be enough to get you through the whole transformation."

"Okay. I didn't think so, but I thought maybe I had gotten the wrong idea at first." Evan said shyly.

"I think you understood correctly." Dodger said as he continued to draw the intricate patterns in Evan's palm.

Evan took a deep breath, then slowly released it. "Okay. But could you just tell me one more time, so I'm completely sure. Are you and Rafe really sure that this is okay with both of you?"

"Love isn't possession. I love Rafe first, best and always, but that doesn't mean that I can never love anyone else. That would be only one step removed from being alone." Dodger said seriously. "Evan. I want to help you. Rafe wants me to help you. All that's left is for you to accept my help." Dodger said frankly.

"What are we going to do? I mean... how far do we go?" Evan asked nervously.

"As far as you want to go. The whole point is to flood you with pleasant sensations and benevolent emotions while your nervous system is transformed. We won't do anything that you would find uncomfortable, immoral or painful." Dodger said seriously.

Evan felt a slight nausea beginning in his stomach and said, "Something's happening, so I guess we'd better get to stimulating."

"Where would you be most comfortable? This folds out into a bed, if you like." Dodger asked gently.

"No. At least, not now." Evan said slowly.

"What would you like to do, Evan? Tell me what would make you feel good right now." Dodger said soothingly.

"Right now, I think I'd just like for you to hold me." Evan said timidly.

"Then scoot around here. I love giving hugs." Dodger said with a grin.

* * * * *

As Evan lay back against Dodger's chest, he felt contentment as cool strong arms wrapped around him.

He felt safe.

Even his stomach settled.

"What's going to happen to me?" Evan asked as he reached up to pet one of Dodger's hands on his chest.

"You mean, after the transformation?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Yeah. My mom is dead. I don't have any other relatives. Where will I go? How will I live?" Evan asked thoughtfully.

"I don't know, exactly. But Rafe will make sure that you end up someplace safe where you can be happy." Dodger said assuringly.

"Are you sure?" Evan asked as he sat up a little and turned to look Dodger in the eyes.

"Completely sure." Dodger said sincerely.

Evan nodded, then rested back against Dodger's chest again.

"You know that you won't be able to go back to your old life, right?" Dodger asked hesitantly.

Evan let out a sigh, then said, "Yeah."

"Is there anyone you're going to miss?" Dodger asked casually.

"Not really. I mean, there was this one guy, but..."

"But what?" Dodger asked curiously.

"I met him a few weeks ago in the park. I really liked him. I've gone back a few times since and 'accidentally' ran into him so we could talk some more. But I don't even know his last name." Evan said regretfully.

Dodger leaned down a little bit and gave Evan a gentle kiss on the tip of his ear. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Yeah."

"Well, maybe you'll meet someone in Shadeside that you'll like." Dodger said hopefully.

"Is Shadeside a place?" Evan asked curiously.

"Not exactly. It's more of a community. When you're among Shadesiders, you don't have to hide who and what you are. You don't have to be careful about what you say or how you behave." Dodger said absently.

"So I'm going to be locked away from the rest of the world... from the Brightside?" Evan asked cautiously.

"Oh no, nothing like that. You'llÂ be free to walk among the brightsiders all you want, as long as you don't reveal what you've become. I'm just saying that after a while, living the lie wears on you."

"I'm not feeling anything, you know, like sick or anything, right now, but would it be okay if I kissed you?" Evan asked shyly.

"Sure. All you have to do is turn over." Dodger said with a smile that could be heard in his voice.

Evan carefully sat up, then turned and lay back down, chest to chest with Dodger.

"Thanks for doing this for me, and for being so nice about it." Evan said, then moved in to give Dodger the gentlest of kisses.

Dodger closed his eyes and enjoyed the sensation of Evan's lips barely ghosting against his.

"That was sweet." Dodger said as he opened his eyes.

Evan smiled, then scooted down a little to rest his head against Dodger's shoulder.

"How long is this going to take?" Evan asked quietly.

"I wouldn't expect it to go on for more than twelve hours." Dodger said simply.

"How will you know when it's finished?" Evan asked curiously.

"You'll have fangs." Dodger said gently.

Evan pulled back with surprise to look Dodger in the eyes.

"Only when you want them." Dodger added quietly.

"Do you have fangs?" Evan asked curiously.

"Yes. Do you want to see?" Dodger asked with a gentle smile.

"Yeah." Evan said immediately.

Dodger bared his teeth and to Evan's surprise, they looked perfectly normal.

Before he could ask about it, Evan noticed Dodger's canines start to push out from his gums and become more pronounced.

They continued to drop down until they were, indeed, a set of fangs.

"Wow!" Evan said with astonishment.

"Not really of much use in the modern world. More of a parlor trick than anything else." Dodger said as his fangs receded.

"So what else can you do? I mean, how are you different from how I am... was?"

"It's mostly little stuff that you'd expect. The transformation makes the whole body work better. Super efficient. Healing happens almost instantly, we live a really long time, and we're stronger than we look."

"Sounds great." Evan said as he wriggled a little to get more comfortable against Dodger's chest.

"It can be. But there's a downside, too. Our senses are more acute, so things like bright light, shrill sounds and strong odors will bother us to the point of being painful." Dodger said as he absently rubbed Evan's back in small circles.

"So is that why vampires can't go out in sunlight?" Evan asked curiously.

"Yes. But under certain circumstances we can go out in sunlight very briefly. On overcast days we can go out longer. Direct sunlight on our super sensitive skin is... you'll just have to experience it to know what I mean. Sunburn doesn't even begin to describe it. Plus any bright light hurts our eyes." Dodger said distantly.

"Can you use sunscreen or sunglasses?" Evan asked curiously.

"Sure, those things help a little. But they aren't an answer. They're just temporary means to get around the problem." Dodger said frankly.

Silence fell between the pair until Dodger asked, "What about you? What's your life like?"

"What do you want to know?" Evan asked quietly.

"You mentioned your mom, but what about your dad?" Dodger asked curiously.

"I never met him. I don't know anything about him." Evan said immediately.

"Was his last name Delgado?" Dodger asked as he began rubbing Evan's back again.

"No. That is... was my mom's name. I don't know anything about my father. My mom wouldn't talk about him at all. Whenever I'd ask, she'd just get all sad and depressed, so I stopped asking."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to bring up any painful memories. I'd just like to get to know you." Dodger said gently.

"There's not much to know. I do okay in school. I don't have any hobbies or anything like that. I'm just an average guy." Evan said quietly.

"I doubt that." Dodger said with a smile, then leaned down to give Evan a kiss on the forehead.

Evan smiled at the move, then continued, "It's true. I've always felt like I should be doing something more. Like there was this destiny waiting for me, if I could just open my eyes and see it. I felt like I had all this passion and drive to do something great... but until I knew what it was, all I could do is wait and get through each day until it finally arrived."

"Well, maybe that's what's happening, now." Dodger said frankly.

"Maybe." Evan said uncertainly.

"How old are you, Evan?"

"I just turned fifteen." Evan said quietly, then hesitantly asked, "Are you going to want to stop holding me now?"

Dodger chuckled with delight, then said, "No, Evan. One thing you'll learn pretty quick, on the Shadeside, is that people see age as an arbitrary number. It really doesn't mean anything."

"Why not?" Evan asked curiously.

"How old do you think I am?" Dodger asked casually.

"I don't know. Seventeen or eighteen?"

"I was born fifty-six years ago." Dodger said quietly.

"No way!" Evan said as he pulled back to look Dodger in the eyes.

"Yes way." Dodger said with a grin. "I was born in 1955 on a little farm in West Virginia. I was the youngest of eleven children."

"Eleven?" Evan asked with surprise.

"That was more common back then." Dodger said with a smile at Evan's reaction. "Let's just say that my home life was 'not good'."

Evan nodded that he didn't need further explanation.

"So I ran away." Dodger said simply. "I was sixteen."

"Did you get attacked by a Darksider?" Evan asked hesitantly.

"No. I found myself on the streets of Columbus with twenty three cents to my name. It was as bad as it had ever been for me. I'm pretty sure that if I hadn't met someone that night, I would have either frozen to death or starved to death." Dodger said quietly.

"He talked to me and listened to me. He gave me food and a safe place to stay." Dodger said joyfully. "I couldn't believe that anyone could be so wonderful and loving."

"Did he... I mean, what did you have to do?" Evan asked slowly.

"Nothing. He just loved me. He never asked for anything from me except for my company. He seemed to be so alone." Dodger said distantly. "In fact, that was the thing that I just couldn't seem to accept. He loved me. Not my body or what I could do for him. He just loved me for being me."

"So what happened?" Evan asked cautiously.

"He got a phone call and said that he was going to have to move away... to New Mexico." Dodger said quietly as he looked into the past. Finally, he continued, "He said that I couldn't go with him. But I said that if he'd commit to me, I'd wait for him for as long as it took. I think that's what did it. He said that before I could decide something like that, that there were some things about him that I should know."

"So he told you he was a Shadesider." Evan guessed.

"Yes. Of course, I didn't know what that was, but he basically explained to me all the things that I just told you." Dodger said carefully.

"How did you handle it?" Evan asked curiously.

"Not nearly as well as you're handling it." Dodger said frankly, then leaned down to give Evan a quick kiss on the top of his head.

"But I eventually understood and believed what he was telling me."

"So, if you didn't get attacked by a Darksider, does that mean that he changed you himself?" Evan asked slowly.

"He offered to change me. You see, the thing is, that he was going to New Mexico to work with some other Shadesiders. There was no way a Brightsider would be allowed to be there with him." Dodger said quietly.

"So you had to choose to be changed, or to go on without him." Evan said distantly, knowing how difficult that decision must have been.

"Yes. And even though I was scared to give up who I was... what I was. I loved him enough to take the chance." Dodger said quietly.

"Even though it might have killed you." Evan added in a whisper.

Dodger nodded and held Evan a little bit tighter in his arms.

"That night was the first time we ever kissed." Dodger said with a smile.

"It sounds wonderful." Evan said distantly.

"At the time, it was the most terrifying thing I had ever done. But looking back on it now. It was perfect." Dodger said gently.

"It was Rafe, wasn't it?" Evan asked slowly.

"Yes."

"And now you're trying to do for me what he did for you." Evan said thoughtfully.

"As much as I can." Dodger said, then put his hands on Evan's arms and guided him to lean away slightly. "I don't know if it's because of the change, or if being around Rafe all these years has caused me to have a greater capacity for love. But for whatever reason. I love you, Evan Delgado. I want you to come

through the change into a wonderful new world of possibilities that you couldn't imagine before. And when the change is complete. I will continue to love you."

Evan heard the sincerity in Dodger's voice and could see it in his eyes. The intensity and absolute conviction behind Dodger's words caused the last vestiges of disbelief to leave Evan.

He leaned forward and initiated a kiss. Firmer and more self assured than the one before.

Dodger held Evan tight as the kiss deepened and became more intense.

Every touch seemed to burn like fire on Evan's suddenly sensitive skin.

He became aware of Dodger's erection pressing into is hip as he began to writhe.

"I love you, too, Dodger." Evan whispered against Dodger's lips.

"How do you feel?" Dodger asked as his hands drifted lower to cup Evan's butt.

"Hot." Evan said before diving in to plunder Dodger's mouth.

A groan erupted from Dodger's throat, giving added evidence that he was enjoying what Evan was doing to him.

Evan finally pulled out of the kiss long enough to take a much needed breath, and whispered, "You taste so good."

"Are you ready for the bed?" Dodger asked gently.

"No, but I'm ready for this." Evan said as he worked a hand between their bodies and felt along Dodger's confined erection.

"Whatever you want, Evan. Tonight is for you."

* * * * *

Evan reluctantly got off the couch, then knelt before Dodger and unbuckled his pants.

Dodger undid the fly and they worked together to get the pants down and off of him.

As Dodger was about to pull down his boxer shorts, Evan took gentle hold of his hand to stop him.

"I want to feel everything." Evan said in a whisper.

Dodger withdrew his hands and watched as Evan traced the outline of his erection in the fabric of the boxers.

He took in a sharp hitch of breath as Evan brought his cheek to the side of his erection and began to nuzzle it like a friendly cat.

By this time Dodger was clutching the cushions of the couch to keep himself from grabbing onto Evan and guiding him to bring him pleasure.

Evan turned his head, and through the fabric of the boxer shorts, he slowly moved up the length of Dodger's erection, experiencing it entirely with his overly sensitive lips.

"Evan. That's..." Dodger gasped, not knowing what the next word was going to be, or even if there was one.

Finally, Dodger felt Evan's fingers grip the waistband, and pull it out from his body ever so slightly.

"I want to taste you." Evan whispered, then brought the elastic down just enough to reveal the sheathed head of Dodger's erection.

"Beautiful." Evan said in a breathy whisper, then reached out with just the tip of his tongue to explore the tiny glistening bit of the glans that was just barely exposed.

"Oh, Evan!" Dodger gasped at the minuscule stimulation.

The sensation stopped, and Dodger looked down to find Evan with a considering look on his face.

"Sweet." Evan said with a smile.

"Anything you want." Dodger whispered, willing Evan to do something, anything, to provide him more stimulation.

Evan smiled, feeling inordinately pleased that he was able to bring this pleasure to Dodger who had not only helped ease his fears, but had even professed to love him.

Using his thumb and forefinger, Evan gently pinched some of the loose foreskin, just below the head and pulled down slightly, causing more of the head to be exposed.

Dodger inhaled deeply at the sensation.

Then Evan stuck out his tongue, and with just the tip, gathered up the pearly drop that was waiting for him.

Still using only the little bit of loose skin gathered between his thumb and forefinger, Evan began to ease the hood of foreskin up and down, achingly slowly.

"More." Dodger gasped.

If anything, Evan moved even more slowly than before.

Dodger was about to ask, no, beg for more when he felt Evan start to lick one of his balls.

"Evan... that's... Oh, Evan." Dodger whispered as he writhed under the myriad of delicate sensations.

As he was working on giving Dodger's other ball equal attention, Evan noticed them beginning to pull up and knew what that meant.

Without warning, Evan moved to Dodger's cock and engulfed the head, while swirling his tongue around the tip.

"Ahhh!" Dodger screamed as his fingers dug into the vinyl of the couch.

Evan felt the pulse and twitch just a moment before the cool seed gushed into his mouth.

He sucked and swallowed as quickly as he could, trying to keep up with the flow.

Dodger arched his hips as the second wave of his orgasm hit with surprising force.

Evan held on to Dodger's hips, determined not to lose even one drop of his seed.

Spasm upon spasm of release coursed through Dodger until he was finally spent.

Evan continued to suckle until he was sure that he had been given the last little bit. Then he released the deflating cock and crawled back up onto the couch, until he was once again chest to chest with Dodger.

"Evan. That was..." Dodger seemed to be lost, but Evan waited for him patiently. Finally, Dodger was able to come back to himself enough to continue, "...amazing."

"I've always wanted to do that." Evan said, sounding very pleased with himself.

"You've never done that before?" Dodger asked with surprise.

"No. I've read about it and seen pictures and even a few movies on the Internet. But this is my first time actually doing it." Evan said shyly.

"It was incredible." Dodger said, then leaned forward to give Evan a quick kiss. "Perfect." Dodger said, followed by another kiss. "Awesome."

Evan giggled, then said, "I'm glad you liked it."

"I did." Dodger said, feeling sated and peaceful and absolutely wonderful, "Would you like me to do that to you?"

"No." Evan said slowly. "I think I'd rather you do what you like. You know, what you're used to."

"I'd really like that. But you'll have to let me know if I'm doing something you don't like. Not everyone likes the same things." Dodger said carefully.

"Dodger, I'm fifteen. I'm pretty sure that whatever you want to do will work for me." Evan said frankly.

"Finish your juice, then help me pull the bed out. I think we're going to need a little more room to maneuver for what I have in mind." Dodger said happily.

Evan got up and felt slightly embarrassed by the tent that his erection was making in his sweatpants.

Dodger noticed the reaction and thought it was incredibly sweet.

After taking a drink of his juice, Evan looked back to where Dodger had been reclined on the couch and noticed the torn vinyl.

"Don't worry about it. That's why we're down here instead of upstairs." Dodger said with a grin as he pulled up his pants.

"So we can trash the place?" Evan asked curiously.

"Things sometimes get a little bit out of control during transition. If we break some furniture or tear up some sheets, it's not a problem down here." Dodger said before taking a long drink of juice.

"Did you do anything like that during your transition?" Evan asked curiously.

"I tore a hole in Rafe's mattress." Dodger said with a chuckle.

"Was he upset?" Evan asked curiously.

"No. I felt a little bit bad about it, but he said that he took it as a compliment." Dodger said with a broad smile at the memory.

"Okay." Evan said with an answering smile as he looked at the torn vinyl again. "I'll do that too."

"Good." Dodger said happily, then in a more serious tone, he continued, "Now help me scoot out the coffee table and fold out the bed."

Evan was only too happy to comply.

His erection hadn't gone down, and, if anything, had gotten even harder.

* * * * *

As soon as the bed was unfolded, Dodger walked to Evan and knelt before him.

"May I?" Dodger asked as he brought his hands up to the waistband of Evan's sweatpants.

"Please." Evan said in a nervous whisper.

Dodger slowly pulled down the pants, and smiled when Evan's erection came free and stood at attention.

"Take off your shirt." Dodger whispered as he surveyed the stiff member before him.

Evan quickly skinned off the shirt, then looked down at Dodger with question. "How is it?"

"Beautiful." Dodger whispered, then moved in to give the erection a gentle kiss, just below the head.

Evan let out a shuddering breath at the sensation.

Dodger then stood and, taking Evan into his arms, proceeded to give him a long, lingering kiss.

"Thanks for making my first time wonderful." Dodger said against Evan's lips.

"Your first time?" Evan asked curiously.

"This will be the first time that I've ever helped someone through transition. I was a little bit nervous." Dodger admitted shyly.

"Are you nervous now?" Evan asked curiously.

"No. Not at all." Dodger said happily. "I was afraid that this would feel wrong, like I was betraying Rafe. But it isn't like that at all. I'm doing this with love. Love for him and love for you. I couldn't be happier."

"I didn't know what love... I mean *real* love, felt like before. But I *do* love you, Dodger." Evan said, then moved in for another kiss.

Dodger slowly guided Evan to sit on the bed, only breaking the kiss when he was seated.

Evan scooted himself onto the bed, then watched as Dodger quickly shed his clothes.

"You're beautiful." Evan said in a husky voice.

"So are you." Dodger said as he climbed onto the bed beside Evan.

"What do we do first?" Evan asked nervously.

"I thought we could start with a kiss and see what comes up." Dodger said with a devilish grin.

Evan chuckled, then said, "I don't think it's going to get any more 'up' than it already is."

"I see what you mean." Dodger said, then lazily stroked his fingertips across Evan's straining erection.

Evan's whole body tensed at the sensation.

"I just want you to keep one thing in mind while we do this." Dodger said as his gaze fixed on Evan's eyes.

"That you love me." Evan said in a whisper.

"Right." Dodger said, then moved in to give Evan a long, lingering kiss.

As the kiss became more passionate, Evan worked his hand down to find Dodger's erection and began working it at a slow, deliberate pace.

"You don't need to do that, it's your turn." Dodger said against his lips.

"I lost my scorecard." Evan said playfully, then began to kiss Dodger again.

Dodger dragged his hand down Evan's side and came to rest on his hip, his fingers just grazing the cleft of Evan's buttocks.

The reaction from Evan was unexpected.

At the feeling of the fingers near his most private opening, Evan became even more excited and began to slowly thrust against Dodger's thigh.

Dodger noticed his increased interest, and slowly began to work his fingers lower, deeper.

"Yes." Evan whispered between feverish kisses.

Guided only by touch, Dodger found the puckered opening and carefully allowed one finger to graze along it.

"Yes Dodger. Yes." Evan moaned into Dodger's mouth.

"Lay on your stomach, I'm going to need to prepare you if we're going to do this without pain." Dodger said gently.

Evan seemed to have stopped and had a contemplative look on his face.

"Is something wrong?" Dodger asked with concern.

Evan's gaze slowly moved to Dodger, then he quietly said, "What do you think is the most unromantic thing I could possibly say right now?"

Dodger looked at Evan with surprise at the question and couldn't think of any way to answer.

"I need to use the toilet." Evan said regretfully.

"Oh." Dodger said with realization, then asked, "Would you let me feel your stomach for a moment?"

"Um... sure." Evan said and rolled onto his back.

Dodger gently placed one of his hands on Evan's lower belly, then closed his eyes in concentration.

"Is something wrong?" Evan asked curiously.

Dodger opened his eyes and broke into a smile. "No. Actually, I can feel the activity. This is a very good sign."

"How's that?" Evan asked curiously.

"This means that your intestines have nearly completed the transformation. And now that they're working more efficiently... let's just say that when you're finished, you'll like the difference." Dodger said with a smile.

"I'm sorry that we had to stop." Evan mumbled as he stood at the side of the bed, then pulled on his sweat pants.

"We've got all night. Go do what you need to do." Dodger said casually, then added, "While you're doing that, I'm going to see if I can find some duct tape for the couch cushions."

"Where's the bathroom?" Evan asked shyly.

"Right over there."

* * * * *

"How do you feel?" Dodger asked as Evan walked back into the room.

"Ten pounds lighter." Evan said frankly.

Dodger nodded that he understood, then patted the bed beside him.

Evan pulled down his sweat pants without hesitation, then hopped into the bed beside Dodger.

"How are you feeling now?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Wonderful!" Evan said with a grand smile. "I feel like I could run like the wind, like I could fly!"

"Once you're finished with your transition, we'll need to go for a night run in the woods." Dodger said peacefully. "There's nothing else like it."

Evan looked at Dodger curiously.

"You'll be stronger, faster and more agile than you were before. All your senses will be heightened. It's such a feeling of freedom. You'll just have to experience it for yourself." Dodger said dreamily. "I've spent so many nights running naked through these woods."

"I can't wait." Evan said with a smile at the thought, then brought a hand up at a strange feeling in his mouth.

"Is something wrong?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"You know those fangs you were talking about, I think they're here." Evan said slowly.

"It's too soon." Dodger said with concern, then asked, "May I see?"

Evan turned to face Dodger, then bared his teeth.

"Look at that..." Dodger said in wonder.

"Does that mean that I'm done? That I'm through the transition?" Evan asked slowly, finding it difficult to talk around the fangs.

"Yes. From everything I've heard, that's the last sign. But you went through it too fast and skipped over several steps." Dodger said with concern.

"Is that bad?" Evan asked curiously.

"Um... no. I don't think so." Dodger said slowly, then cautiously asked, "Tell me, you don't have a desire to peel my face off and eat my eyes, just for the sheer pleasure of it, do you?"

"No. Not that I'm aware of." Evan said slowly.

"Well, good."

"The only desire I'm feeling right this minute is that I'd kind of like for you to hold me again... and maybe another kiss." Evan said timidly.

Dodger broke into a smile and said, "Evan, you can have a hug or a kiss whenever you want."

"What about Rafe?" Evan asked cautiously.

"You can hug and kiss him, too." Dodger said with a smile.

"How do I make the fangs go away? I don't want to accidentally bite you." Evan asked slowly.

"It's hard to describe. You have these muscles that you've never used before." Dodger said with difficulty. "It's kind of a trial and error thing that you'll have to figure out."

Dodger watched as Evan made a few facial contortions.

"I need to remember to bring a movie camera the next time I do this." Dodger chuckled.

Evan looked at him with question.

"Never mind."

Evan continued to try different things until something finally seemed to work.

"It looks like you've got it!" Dodger said with excitement.

Evan concentrated on working the weak muscle to constrict and pull back his fangs.

"That was hard." Evan finally said.

"It gets easier." Dodger said, then opened his arms.

Evan gladly climbed on top of Dodger and noticed that his body didn't seem chilly, like it did before.

"Are you getting warmer or am I getting colder?" Evan asked curiously.

"You're getting colder. Now that your body is working more efficiently, you don't need to generate as much body heat. Your regular temperature will probably level off at about seventy degrees." Dodger said frankly.

Evan nodded as he laid his head against Dodger's shoulder.

"Is something wrong?" Dodger asked with concern.

"Well, it's over, isn't it? I'm through it." Evan said quietly.

"Yes. It seems so." Dodger said gently, concerned by Evan's quiet tone.

"So there's no reason that you have to hold me or kiss me now." Evan said reluctantly.

"There's a very good reason." Dodger said seriously.

Evan raised himself up slightly to look Dodger in the eyes, then hesitantly asked, "What?"

"Because we both want to." Dodger said seriously.

Evan thought about it for a moment, then slowly shook his head.

"What's bothering you?" Dodger asked with concern, "Is it Rafe?"

"Yes." Evan said immediately.

Dodger nodded, then asked, "What would you think about it if he were here, right now, telling you it was okay?"

"You mean here, naked, in bed with us?" Evan asked cautiously.

Dodger smiled and said, "Well, I wasn't thinking of that. But, sure, I mean, we've never invited anyone into our bed before. But I don't think he would be upset by the suggestion."

Evan thought about it for a moment, then shook his head.

"Too much?" Dodger asked quietly.

"No. I just don't want to take the chance of messing up what you guys have. You need to be with Rafe and he needs to be with you. I'm just going to have to find someone who needs to be with me." Evan said slowly.

"I can respect that, Evan." Dodger said with a gentle smile, then quietly added, "Thank you."

"I think we should get dressed." Evan said regretfully.

"One kiss?" Dodger asked hopefully.

Evan smiled, then moved in to give Dodger a full, deep kiss.

When it was finished, Dodger smiled and said, "One thing hasn't changed. I'll always love you."

Evan smiled and said, "I'll always love you, too, Dodger."

* * * * *

As soon as Dodger and Evan came to the top of the stairs, they could hear a heavy-handed knocking on the front door.

"That's strange. We don't get many visitors." Dodger said as he finally crested the stairs and made his way to the front door.

Evan followed along anxiously as the knocking repeated and seemed to be even more urgent.

Given all the twists and turns of the day so far, Evan couldn't help but think that this might be something dangerous.

Dodger slowly opened the door, then stood back and held it open as he said, "Duncan! What a surprise! Come in!"

Chapter 16

Evan watched as a man, who looked to be about sixty years old, walked into the room.

Dodger carefully closed the door, then pulled the man into a joyful hug.

"It's been ages since I've seen you. What are you doing here?" Dodger asked happily.

"Duran's gone." The man, Duncan, said as tears welled in his eyes.

"Gone? What do you mean 'gone'?" Dodger asked with immediate concern.

"I think... he ran away." The man said in a whisper.

Dodger froze for a moment, then glanced at Evan.

"Duncan, this is Evan." Dodger said quietly, "Evan, this is my brother, Duncan."

"It's nice to meet you." Evan said as he offered his hand to the distraught man.

"Yeah." Duncan said as he shook Evan's hand with a firm grip. "Shadesider, huh?"

Evan quickly brought a hand up to his mouth, but found that his teeth were normal. Finally he hesitantly asked, "Does it show?"

Duncan chuckled, then said, "The cold handshake kind of gave it away."

Evan smiled and nodded.

"Why don't you two go into the living room and get comfortable while I get us something to drink?" Dodger said as he gestured at the couch and chairs.

Duncan nodded, then led the way.

Evan cast an uncertain look at Dodger, but followed Duncan into the living room.

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Evan sat in uncomfortable silence as he looked at the older man on the couch who looked nothing short of miserable.

Dodger hurried into the room carrying three glasses and it looked to Evan as though he didn't have a very good grip on them.

Before Evan could stand, Dodger easily placed the first glass on the coffee table before Duncan, then extended his hand and offered the second to Evan.

"Thanks." Evan whispered as he accepted the glass, which he noticed was filled with the orange/yellow liquid that he and Dodger had enjoyed earlier.

Involuntarily, Evan glanced at Duncan's glass and noticed that it was brown and fizzy, probably a cola of some sort.

"I'm sorry that I'm interrupting you like this. I just... I didn't know where else to turn. I've already filed a missing persons report with the police." Duncan said as his eyes filled with tears.

"That's fine. Just tell me what happened." Dodger said as he sat next to his brother on the couch.

"Duran's been kind of quiet and stand-offish for a while now, but I just chalked it up to him being the youngest and trying to adjust to his brother and sisters all moving out of the house. It's been a difficult adjustment for all of us." Duncan said quietly.

"Did he leave a note?" Dodger asked gently.

"No. But he took some of his things." Duncan said gravely.

"How long has he been gone?" Dodger asked with concern.

"About a week." Duncan muttered.

"And you're just telling me about it now?" Dodger asked with surprise.

"I thought that after he got a taste of what it's like out on his own that he'd come home. Desi, he's only sixteen! How can he survive out on the streets all by himself?" Duncan asked in anguish.

"If you'll remember, I lived on the streets for a few months when I was that age. It's possible that he's just fine." Dodger said as he looked his brother in the eyes.

"Why did he do it, Desi? I gave him everything he could want. Why would he just up and leave like that?" Duncan asked desperately.

"I don't know, Dunc. I think the only person who'll be able to answer that question is Duran." Dodger said regretfully.

"Is there anything you can do to help? I'm out of places to look and things to try." Duncan said in a low voice.

"Rafe has a lot of connections. He's kind of in the middle of something at the moment. But just as soon as he's free, I'll talk to him about it and he can make a few calls. With the police on the Brightside and the underground network on the Shadeside both looking for Duran, I'm sure we'll find him in no time." Dodger said soothingly.

Evan watched the entire scene and felt the desire to do something to ease Duncan's anguish, but knew there was nothing he could do.

"I'd better get home. Dennie and Donny came home to help in the search. Duronda can't get away from college, she's bogged down with her studies, but she's going to come home as soon as she can break away for a few days." Duncan said distractedly.

"Go on. As soon as Rafe gets in I'll let him know what's going on and we'll spread the word." Dodger said seriously.

Duncan stood and hesitated for a moment, seeming to be uncertain of what he was doing.

Dodger also stood, then pulled his brother into a firm hug.

It took a moment for Evan to realize that Duncan had broken down into tears.

Dodger held Duncan close until the tears subsided.

Once Duncan got himself back under control, Dodger quietly said, "Go home and be with your family. They need you to be strong for them right now. But when it gets to be too much, come back out here and I'll have a shoulder ready and waiting just for you."

"Thanks, Desi." Duncan whispered.

Dodger guided Duncan to walk with him as he headed for the front door.

Evan took a long, slow drink from his glass as he tried to calm himself after seeing the emotional display.

* * * * *

"Evan, I need to make a quick phone call. I'll be back in just a minute." Dodger said after seeing his brother off.

A nod was Evan's response, then he took another drink of his juice.

For the first time since the attack, Evan found himself alone.

Unbidden, the memories of the attack returned.

Grief threatened to overwhelm him as he could picture the look on his mother's face as the insane beast... the darksider, bit into her throat and tore it open.

"It's okay." A voice intruded into his thoughts.

Evan looked up through watery eyes to see Dodger looking at him with concern.

"I know it hurts. But I'm here for you. If you need to talk or just to be held, whatever you need, just know that you're not alone." Dodger said seriously.

"Thanks, Dodger." Evan whispered as he tried to get his emotions back under control.

"I just called a woman named Leila. She's sort of the local expert on helping people through their transition. I wanted to know if she'd ever had anyone get through their transition as quickly and easily as you did." Dodger said as he took his place on the couch.

"What did she say?" Evan asked as he picked up his glass to take another drink.

"She just confirmed what I already told you. She didn't seem to think that it was anything to worry about. But I just wanted to make sure that it wasn't the indication of some sort of a problem." Dodger said frankly.

"Thanks for checking." Evan said slowly, then looked up suddenly at the sound of a knock on the door.

"No guests for weeks at a time, then two in one night? What are the chances?" Dodger asked with a chuckle as he got up and walked to the door.

Evan remained sitting, and heard as Dodger asked, "Come in. What's wrong?"

Dodger walked back into the living room and Evan saw two men following him.

It took a moment, but all of a sudden there was a flash of recognition. Evan's breath caught in his throat as he realized that the two men were the people who had saved him from his attacker.

"I didn't... I'm sorry..." One of the men said when he spotted Evan.

"Please, come in and sit down." Dodger said as he gestured toward the couch.

"I'm so sorry about your mother." One of the men said to Evan and seemed to be one second from breaking into tears.

"We did everything we could. I swear." The other man said more calmly.

With a little effort, Evan was finally able to force himself to say, "Thank you for trying."

"What's going on?" Dodger asked curiously as he took a seat in the chair beside Evan's.

"For the past few months, we've been assigned to protect Janice and Evan. The Darksiders must have been watching and planning this for a while and found just the right time and place to get to them before we could intervene." The second man said regretfully.

There seemed to be a million thoughts swirling in Evan's mind at once, but one forced it's way to the forefront and Evan suddenly asked, "You were protecting us? Why?"

"Rafe told us that he thought there might be a darksider targeting you. That's all we were told." The first man said quietly.

"Rafe?" Evan said in astonishment.

"That's really all we know. Is Rafe here? We need to talk to him." The second man said seriously.

"No. As far as I know, he's still out trying to find who did this." Dodger said frankly.

"He's probably with Morgan." One of the men said.

The second nodded and they stood to leave.

Before they could go, Evan quickly said, "Thank you for trying to help me and my mom."

Both men stopped in their tracks and turned to look at Evan in unison.

"I only wish we had arrived a few seconds sooner. We might have been able to save her." The first man said quietly, then they both turned and left.

Evan looked at Dodger, not even knowing which of many questions he wanted to ask first.

"You'll need to ask Rafe when he gets back. I've told you everything I know." Dodger said regretfully.

Evan slowly nodded, then felt Dodger's arms encircle him in a tender hug.

* * * * *

"I'd better get something started for supper. I'm betting that Rafe's gonna be starved when he gets home. You can come into the kitchen and keep me company if you like." Dodger said as he held Evan in a loose hug.

"I don't know. I feel like I should be doing something..." Evan said in a lost voice.

"Well, I know that there are things that will need to be done. Certain arrangements and decisions should be made. But I don't think it would be a good idea to start in on doing any of them until Rafe gets back. Everything is pretty much up in the air until he can tell us what's going on." Dodger said honestly.

Evan thought about the words, then slowly nodded.

Dodger had just guided him into the kitchen when there was a knock on the door.

"We haven't had this many visitors in years." Dodger said as he left to answer it.

Evan stood in the kitchen, his thoughts and emotions swirling and twisting, making him feel off balance.

"Hello." He heard Dodger say cautiously in the next room.

"Excuse me for visiting so late, but I heard that Evan Delgado might be here." A man said cautiously.

The man's voice struck a familiar chord with Evan and, without thinking, he raced out of the kitchen and ran to the front door.

"Uncle Kevin!" Evan said as he ran to the man to hug him.

Dodger watched the scene and to him it seemed that the distraught teenager he had been talking to moments before had suddenly disappeared and been replaced by an energetic five year old.

Dodger's smile faded when he noticed the anguished look on the man's face.

"How did you find me? Where have you been? It's been almost two years!" Evan rambled as he continued to hug the man.

"I've been working on some important things, but I've done my best to keep tabs on you. As soon as I heard about what happened to Janice, I went to the hospital to see you." Kevin said quietly.

Dodger gestured for Kevin to follow him to the living room.

It took some doing, but Kevin was finally able to coax Evan to adjust his grip enough so that they could walk.

Once they were seated, Kevin continued, "When I arrived at the hospital, they told me that you were already gone, that you'd been taken to be seen by a specialist."

"So how did you find us?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"I had just about given up on finding Evan when someone mentioned that the doctor who took him was Dr. Killian. That's when everything fell into place. Up until that point, I had held out the hope that what happened to Janice and Evan was just a 'normal' mugging or attack. As soon as I knew that Rafe was involved..." Kevin ended with a shrug of one shoulder.

"You know Rafe?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Yes. For many years. But I can't really tell you about that. I only know my part of the story and it would really be better if Rafe explained it to you." Kevin said reluctantly.

Dodger slowly nodded, then quietly said, "With any luck, Rafe will be home before very long. I was just about to start on supper, if you'd like to join us."

"You know I'm not..." Kevin started to say.

Dodger nodded that he did, then waited expectantly.

After a moment to consider, Kevin quietly said, "Yes. I haven't had dinner yet, so thank you."

Dodger smiled, then left the room.

* * * * *

"You're not a Shadesider?" Evan asked hesitantly from Kevin's warm embrace.

"No. But I'm guessing that, since you're here, that now you are." Kevin said slowly.

Evan reluctantly nodded, then said, "I'm sorry if that bothers you."

Kevin gave a weary chuckle and renewed his hug before saying, "It bothers me that you had to go through the pain of losing your mother. I've heard a little about what the transformation is like and I hate that you had to go through that. But I'm not at all bothered by what you've become."

Evan pulled away enough to look Kevin in the eyes, sensing that there was something that the man was withholding.

"I suppose you could say that it's 'in my blood' not to be bothered by it." Kevin said with a slight grin.

Evan's confused expression intensified.

"I'm a thirteenth generation Behilflicher. My family has been the daylight protectors of... I guess you call them Shadesiders now... we've been taking care of them for centuries." Kevin said frankly.

Pieces started slipping into place as Evan thought about what Kevin had just revealed.

"You've been with us since I was a baby... the whole time, you've been protecting me, us... you've been protecting me and my mom for my whole life." Evan said speculatively.

Kevin looked uncomfortable, but slowly nodded.

"Who asked you to protect us?" Evan asked slowly.

"You really need to talk to Rafe about this. I know some things, but I don't know everything and I really wouldn't want to cause problems by telling you only half of what you should know." Kevin said imploringly.

"Did Rafe ask you to protect us?" Evan asked directly.

"Yes." Kevin reluctantly answered.

"Why?" Evan asked seriously.

"I don't know. My father first introduced me to Rafe when I was a small child. I've known him all my life. When Rafe asked me to do this for him, I agreed." Kevin said simply.

"So all that time you spent with us, helping us and taking care of us, that was all an act?" Evan asked as his eyes filled with tears.

"No. I cared for you... I care for you very much. That's why I'm here, now." Kevin said frankly.

"Then why did you leave us?" Evan asked angrily.

"I left because I thought it was what would be best for you and your mother. With me always being around, she wasn't getting on with her life. I wanted her to find love, for you to have a 'father'." Kevin explained gently.

"You were already my father." Evan whispered.

Kevin shook his head as he said, "You deserved so much better. I did as much as I could for you, but I could see that it wasn't enough. I wasn't really a part of your family, I was a friend of your mother's. As you were growing older, I realized that you needed someone that you could call 'dad'."

"So you stepped back and watched from a distance, so mom would have the chance to fall in love and have the life that you couldn't give her." Evan said thoughtfully.

"Yes." Kevin said simply.

"If you loved her that much, then why didn't you marry her?" Evan asked in a soft, curious voice.

"Our whole relationship was based on a lie. That's probably the worst possible foundation for a marriage. Add to that the fact that I'm gay, and I think you can see that it would have been a disaster waiting to happen." Kevin said frankly.

Evan slowly nodded.

"How is everyone in here doing?" Dodger called from the kitchen doorway.

Dodger looked at Kevin and asked, "Do you guys need anything?"

Without hesitation, Kevin shook his head.

After a moment to consider, Evan finally said, "We're fine."

* * * * *

As Evan and Kevin sat quietly in the living room, not really talking about anything, but silently reassuring each other, they heard a strange sound.

It took a moment for Evan to identify the sound as being the garage door opening.

"Rafe's home!" Dodger called from the kitchen.

Evan looked at Kevin anxiously, not knowing if he should be happy, angry or afraid.

"He's a good man." Kevin said softly, and there was absolute conviction in his eyes.

Evan slowly nodded, but still couldn't get his roiling emotions under control.

The pair on the couch heard movement in the kitchen, then a long silence.

Evan strained to hear with his improved 'shadesider' hearing, and finally barely heard Dodger whisper, "I missed you."

From the tone of Dodger's voice, Evan was sure that if he walked into the kitchen right then, he would find Rafe and Dodger in a tight embrace.

* * * * *

"Kevin, it's good to see you again. I'm glad that you're here." Rafe said as he walked into the living room.

"It's always a pleasure, Rafe." Kevin said as he stood.

Rafe shook Kevin's hand for a moment, then gave up control and pulled the man into a surprised hug.

"How are you doing, Rafe?" Kevin asked from their embrace.

"It's a mess, Kevin. Morgan's ten different kinds of pissed off, right now." Rafe said frankly.

"Because of me?" Evan asked cautiously.

Rafe released Kevin and turned his attention to Evan before saying, "No, Evan. Because of me. I had promised to keep you and your mother safe. So Morgan is holding me responsible for all of this."

"Why does he care? Why were you watching us and protecting us?" Evan asked slowly.

"Sit down, Evan. I was hoping that you'd grow up and have a normal brightsider life and I'd never have to tell you about this, but now... you need to know."

Evan took a seat on the couch with Kevin right beside him, then looked at Rafe expectantly.

"I guess that the easiest way to explain this is to explain about your father." Rafe said as he settled into one of the wingback chairs.

"My father? You knew him? Tell me about him! No one's ever told me anything about him." Evan said desperately.

"I know." Rafe said regretfully, then started to tell the story.

"Your father's name was Jimmy Maldonado. He was a really good, decent man and someone that I was proud to call my friend." Rafe said quietly.

Evan felt like he had a million questions that he wanted answered, but couldn't think of anything to say as he waited expectantly.

"When Jimmy was... I don't know, eleven or twelve maybe, his family was attacked by a group of darksiders. His mother, father, aunts and uncles were all killed in the attack. Jimmy was bitten several times, but for some reason, he wasn't turned." Rafe said carefully.

Evan wasn't sure if that was something unusual or not, and couldn't really tell anything by Rafe's distant expression.

"That's when Dodger and I were called in. As you know, I'm a doctor. I specialize in immunity and infectious diseases. I was summoned to try and find out why Jimmy was immune to the transformative agent. It was my hope that if I could discover why he was immune, that I might be able to fashion some sort of a 'cure'."

"So you could make Shadesiders back into Brightsiders?" Evan asked cautiously.

"Yes. If they wanted to be. But I was also hoping that I'd be able to change Darksiders back so that they could regain their humanity and we wouldn't be forced to kill them anymore." Rafe said calmly.

"Well, since I got changed and there wasn't any antidote, I'm guessing that it didn't work out." Evan slowly reasoned.

"That's right. As near as I could tell, what made Jimmy immune was some genetic... difference. It was something that I couldn't duplicate. When I was finally sure that there was no way to make a cure, I came back here to Columbus. But I kept in contact with Sam and Mavis, the Shadesiders who adopted Jimmy, and I did my best to make sure that he had a happy life."

"What happened to him?" Evan asked with dread.

"Jimmy grew up among Shadesiders, but he was a Brightsider. As he grew older, he became a valuable person at the ranch. He would go out and handle things during the day."

"On one of his 'day-trips' away from the ranch, he met a young woman who knocked him off his feet. Sam and Mavis called to tell me about it because they could tell that Jimmy was head over heels in love."

"With my mom?" Evan asked to be sure.

"Yes. When Jimmy met your mother, for the first time he talked about leaving the ranch. He talked about finding a job and moving away and having a wonderful 'normal' life with a house and kids..." Rafe trailed off regretfully.

"What happened?" Evan asked cautiously, and was afraid that it might be something that he really didn't want to know.

"Well, all the dreams that Jimmy had for him and Janice were just that, dreams. He hadn't really made any plans yet. Then, one day, Janice came out to the ranch and told Jimmy that she was pregnant."

"Jimmy was so happy that he told everyone at the ranch. You would have thought that he was the first man to ever be a father, from the way I heard it."

Evan sadly smiled. It soothed something deep inside him to know that his father had wanted him.

"So, in light of the new development, Jimmy and Janice were making plans to be married as quickly as possible. They were planning to live at the ranch until Jimmy could find a job on the Brightside and give his new family their own home." Rafe said sadly.

Evan braced himself for what he knew was coming. He knew that his mother and father never got married, so he knew that the bad thing he was expecting was close.

"To this day, none of us know exactly how it happened. But some darksiders found their way onto the ranch. We can't be sure if Jimmy was their target, but somehow they got into the ranch house, took Jimmy, and got away with him without ever alerting anyone else on the ranch."

"It was just before dawn when they smelled the smoke. One of the men, you met him tonight, his name is Bruce. Even though it was almost daylight, he drove the truck out to find the source of the smoke. What he found was Jimmy, tied to a tree and set on fire." Rafe said as tears started sliding down his cheeks.

"He took Jimmy's body back to the house, and it was obvious that he had been bitten several times. From the look of him, he was completely drained and was already dead when his body was set on fire." Rafe said sadly.

Evan suddenly realized that Kevin was holding him firmly, trying to comfort him through the emotional revelation.

"When Sam called to tell me, he and I were having the same thought. If it wasn't a coincidence and Jimmy was their intended target, then you and Janice could likely be targeted as well."

"And that's when the plan to protect you was born. I contacted Kevin and asked him to go to New Mexico to give Janice a 'convenient' way to get away from the bad memories of losing Jimmy. Sam and Mavis talked to her and encouraged her to try to start a new life somewhere else, and they happened to mention that they had friends in Columbus." Rafe finished quietly.

"Kevin and I arranged a few things. He got you a place to live. I arranged a job. He took care of you while your mom was working... It seemed to work well for a while."

"Then, about six months ago, Kevin noticed some things that concerned him. He called me and said that he thought that there might be darksiders watching you and your mom."

Evan looked quickly at Kevn and saw him nod.

"That's when I arranged for you to be watched. Fortunately, the darksiders are as limited as we are during the daylight hours. It pretty much leveled the playing field as far as protecting you. But on a day like today, as overcast as it was, both darksiders and shadesiders could go out with only minimal protection."

"From what little I've learned about the events of today, whoever was watching you noticed a breach in our security. When you and your mother walked home from her work and your school, you went through the park."

"One man was following you at a distance, and the other was waiting for you to emerge. But, as you know, the Darksider was already in the park, waiting just off the path, laying in wait. By the time my men got to you, it was already too late to save your mother. Although they were able to keep you from being killed, while they were saving you, someone else had already called the police. They retreated so they wouldn't have to talk to the police and answer any inconvenientquestions." Rafe said regretfully.

"So my father's dead. My mom's dead. And I've been turned." Evan said distantly.

"Yes. That's it." Rafe confirmed.

"Why? Why did you protect me? Why did they go through all this to try and kill me? What do they get out of it?" Evan asked suddenly.

"It's because of your father's immunity. They're afraid that your blood can be made into a vaccine that will restore their souls." Rafe said frankly.

"Their souls?" Evan asked in confusion.

"It doesn't matter. You were turned, so you obviously don't have your father's immunity." Rafe said honestly.

Evan slowly nodded as he tried to process all of what he'd just been told.

Dodger silently got up from the second wingback chair and hurried into the kitchen.

Kevin held Evan close, trying to comfort the boy he had known since the day he was born.

Rafe watched the scene before him sadly, not knowing of anything that he might be able to do to make things better.

* * * * *

"Rafe!" A man called as he ran into the house.

Rafe and Evan turned suddenly as Dodger hurried out of the kitchen.

"We almost had him, Rafe. We were just about to take him down when we got jumped. It was an ambush. Judith and Hirsch are dead."

Dodger returned to the kitchen as Rafe seemed to be stunned into silence.

Evan looked at the man and realized that he was the other man who had flown with them in the helicopter.

"I saw about fifteen of them before I got out of there, but there could have been more." Bruce said in a rush, then gratefully accepted the drink that Dodger was pressing into his hand.

"Someone must be organizing them. Your run of the mill darksiders aren't capable of anything so complex." Rafe said distantly.

"Rafe, I saw Laramie there, he was leading them."

"Laramie from the ranch?" Dodger asked with astonishment.

Bruce nodded, then said, "He's got to be a darksider, a high level one, a demon."

"He'd have to be to pass himself off as a shadesider." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"He's got to be the one who's been behind all of this. He was there, he knows all about Jimmy. And I'm sure he was there when Jimmy told us that Janice was pregnant." Bruce said frankly, then a look of regret ghosted over his face as he noticed Evan.

"But why did he wait all this time to make his move?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Maybe he didn't know where to find Evan. When Janice left, no one at the ranch was talking about what happened to her. I didn't even know she was here until I came to work for you." Bruce said seriously.

"Bruce, call the ranch and fill them in on everything you know and everything you suspect. If Laramie is behind this, he might have some operative there who could cause trouble." Rafe said decisively.

Bruce nodded once, then dashed off to the study.

"Kevin, you're our guest and I hate to put you to work."

"Anything you need, Rafe. You know that." Kevin said firmly.

"We need to beef up security around here. You're familiar with the whole operation, so pull anyone you need and put them where you need them. Protecting Evan is our top priority."

"Consider it done." Kevin said before rushing to join Bruce in the study.

* * * * *

Rafe, Dodger and Evan waited for long moments in the living room, waiting for any reports about what was going on.

"It's not good." Bruce said grimly as he walked out of the study.

"What now?" Rafe asked with dread.

"When Kevin started contacting people, they told him that there are darksiders gathering. And it looks like they're not trying to be careful about hiding what they're doing." Bruce said frankly.

"What does that mean?" Dodger asked as he looked from Bruce to Rafe anxiously.

"I think it means that they're planning to storm the place. They know that they've got us penned in." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"If they're gathering an army, then we should probably do the same. We're not going to have enough time. Who do we even call?" Bruce asked in a slightly panicked voice.

"I'll call Morgan. He's been preparing for something like this for decades. I guess it's not paranoia if they really are out to get you."

"Why do they want me? It's my father who was immune. I got bit and I changed, see?" Evan said, then bared his fangs.

"Even so, they... wait... you were only bitten five hours ago. You shouldn't be anywhere near ready to do that." Rafe said suddenly.

Evan shrugged.

"You must have inherited a variant of your father's immunity. Rather than making you immune, it's made you able to bond with the transformative and accept it... this could be significant. This might be what we were looking for, after all." Rafe said distantly.

"What are you going to do to me?" Evan asked cautiously.

"When we have more time, I'll sit down with you and explain everything. Then, only if you agree, I'll use a sample of your blood to try to develop a treatment that can be used on the darksiders to possibly regain their humanity."

"So they'd become shadesiders?" Evan asked slowly.

"Possibly. It's all just a guess until I've had a chance to look at your blood and see how it interacts with the transformative. But there is a chance that this could be the beginning of the end of the darksiders. With their souls restored, we could all finally live in peace."

"Can we do it now?" Evan asked quietly.

"No. I think I should stay focused on other things. There's not much we can do at the moment but wait for the reinforcements to arrive."

"Evan, I bet that after the day you've had, you're about ready for dinner." Dodger said gently.

"Yeah. Thanks. I'm really getting hungry."

"How about you, Rafe?" Dodger asked gently as he looked at Rafe with love.

"Yes. But what I'm most hungry for will have to wait until tonight." Rafe said with a shy smile.

Dodger giggled with delight, then tried to restrain his smile as he said, "I'll just check to see that the roast is done and I'll call you when it's on the table."

* * * * *

Everyone was silent, not wanting to possibly miss something that could be a warning of impending danger.

When Dodger called them in to dinner, nearly everyone in the living room jumped a foot in the air.

Just as the five of them took their seats, the phone started ringing.

Before anyone else could react, Bruce jumped up and grabbed the kitchen extension.

"Yeah." Bruce said by way of greeting.

Everyone stopped eating and listened carefully to his side of the conversation.

After a moment of listening, Bruce held out the phone to Kevin.

With a look of apprehension, Kevin accepted the phone and said, "Kevin, here."

He nodded as he listened, then quietly said, "Good."

Dodger and Evan exchanged a look before looking back to Kevin with concern.

"Got it. Thanks." Kevin said seriously, then hung up the phone.

As Kevin turned toward the table, he was met by everyone's expectant gazes.

"The men are in place. If anyone tries to make a move on the house, we'll know about it." Kevin said as he took his seat again.

There was a long moment of silence, before Dodger slowly said, "Somehow, that doesn't make me feel that much better."

"This doesn't mean that anything is going to happen, we're just trying to be prepared, just in case." Rafe said reassuringly, but something in his expression said that he wasn't completely believing his own words.

No one seemed to have much of an appetite after that. All any of them could do was think about what might be laying in wait for them.

* * * * *

Dodger was standing by the window, holding the drapes back with one hand as he watched.

One of Kevin's lookouts had called ahead to inform them that the first of their 'reinforcements' had arrived and were on the way up to the house.

"There they are." Dodger said as he saw the headlights coming up the driveway.

"Bruce, would you show them where to park? I don't want to have the driveway blocked off by the first few cars and force people to have to hike up the hill." Rafe asked hopefully.

Bruce's only response was to hurry for the door.

"Dodger, would you stay inside with Evan while I take care of things outside?" Rafe asked hopefully.

"No. No way." Dodger said firmly. "Whatever happens to you, happens to me."

Rafe looked like he was about to argue, then seemed to think better of it and said, "Kevin. Would you please take Evan down to the basement and stay with him, there?"

"You need me up here, I've been trained to deal with things like this." Kevin said frankly.

"Yes, I'm sure you would be of help to us outside, but if one of them gets past us and gets to Evan, then... what's the point of any of this? You're our last line of defense. We're depending on you and trusting you with Evan's safety." Rafe said imploringly.

Before Kevin could respond, his cellphone rang in his pocket.

"Yes?" Kevin asked as he opened the phone and put it to his ear.

After a moment, he closed the phone and put it away.

"The darksiders are heading this way." Kevin said with dread.

* * * * *

"I know that you'd rather be out helping the others. If you want to go, I won't mind." Evan said as soon as the elevator doors closed.

"No. Rafe was right. The only reason any of this means anything is if you survive."

"But, if you let them have me, there'd be no reason to fight at all." Evan said cautiously.

Kevin stared at Evan with horror at the statement, then said, "Evan Russell Delgado! If I ever hear you say anything like that again, I'll take you over my knee. I swear to God, I'll do it."

"But..."

"No buts. The only way they get to you is through me. And that's the last I'm hearing about it." Kevin said with absolute conviction.

Evan didn't resist as Kevin pulled him into a hug and walked him off the elevator.

"Thanks for protecting me, Uncle Kevin." Evan finally whispered.

* * * * *

As Dodger walked outside, he noticed that there were now about a dozen people gathered on the front lawn, all of them armed for battle.

One figure stood out to him and he walked over to greet her.

"Thanks for coming, Leila." Dodger said as he took in the sight of her dressed in a skin tight leather body suit and carrying something that looked like a sickle on a chain.

"Morgan's been planning for something like this for years. As soon as he called me, I called the rest of my group, then drove out here as quickly as I could.

Dodger was about to respond when he noticed Rafe approaching with a scabbard in his hand.

"I know you don't have much experience fighting, but I thought that this might be the best weapon for you." Rafe said nervously as he handed the short sword to Dodger.

"I'll just stick close to you and I know that I'll be fine." Dodger said confidently.

"Actually, you might consider working with your strengths." Leila interjected into their conversation.

Dodger and Rafe both looked at Leila with question.

"You've probably got the strongest talent with the thrall of any of us. You should use that, rather than depending on close contact fighting." Leila said frankly.

"You're a lot stronger than I am." Dodger said honestly.

Leila shook her head and said, "I have more experience and control, but your raw talent is greater than mine. When you're confronted, set it free and convince your enemies to either lay down their weapons, or to fight each other. Then, only if any of them are strong enough to resist you, will you need to use that sword."

"Listen to Leila. She knows what she's talking about." Rafe said quietly, then hurried away as another group of reinforcements approached from the parked cars at the side of the house.

"Listen, everyone. Be on guard. I just got word that a large group of darksiders have entered the woods and are heading this way on foot." Bruce called suddenly.

"Dodger, over this way. I want you to guard the North face of the house." Rafe called a moment later and gestured toward where he wanted him.

As Dodger started walking that way, he noticed that Ernie, Blake and Manna were also heading in that direction.

"I've been feeling like I've been domesticated. A good fight is just what I've been needing." Manna said to her husbands as they walked.

Dodger didn't want to intrude on their conversation, but couldn't help but admire the love and devotion that the three of them openly displayed for each other.

Once he was in place, Dodger noticed that Rafe had taken a position at the Northwest corner of the house, the next fighting position nearest him.

"Just about everyone is here. I hope it's enough." Morgan said as he walked up to Rafe.

"It's going to have to be." Rafe said nervously.

"I called on some extra help, but... there's no way I can predict if or when it's going to arrive." Morgan said as he kept his eyes focused on the treeline.

A sound in the distance caught Dodger's attention and as soon as he could see movement, he called out, "There!" as he pointed.

Everyone around him got into their battle stances, ready to fight and hold the line to defend the house.

The first wave of fighters was clumsy and weak.

None of them got anywhere near Dodger, so he was able to watch and assess their fighting technique.

Basically, the Darksiders seemed confident that they would be able to 'hack and slash' their way to the house without too much effort.

The defenders disabused them of the notion with ruthless efficiency.

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The second wave of fighters was more of a challenge.

Their fighting technique was nearly as primitive as the previous wave, but the number of them was such that they posed a legitimate threat.

Dodger glanced over in time to see Leila spring into action.

As a group of darksiders approached her, obviously trying to overwhelm her, Dodger saw a magnificent aura of golden light radiate out from her.

Dodger turned his gaze forward, to watch for approaching fighters, but could clearly hear her voice on the wind seductively saying, "I want only the best. Who among you is best? Step forward and you'll be mine."

The sound of grunts and growls from her direction caused Dodger to glance over to assess the situation.

He found Leila standing with her sickle in hand, ready to make a move as over half a dozen darksider men and women fought amongst themselves.

When Dodger looked forward, he saw a band of ten men coming directly for him with full vampiric speed and intensity.

Rather than panic, he drew on the love and concern for all his friends to keep him focused.. While drawing his sword, he felt as his fangs dropped into place.

"Dodger!" Rafe called out anxiously.

"I'm fine, Rafe." Dodger called back and was surprised to realise that he meant it.

As Dodger let the power of the thrall flow unchecked, he said, "We don't have to fight their battle. There's no reason for us to do this."

All but one of the darksider men slowed their advance and seemed to be carefully considering his words.

"What's the point of dying for nothing. You're free. You don't have to do this." Dodger said as his words floated and hung in the air.

One of the darksiders advanced, and Dodger could see a deep purple aura begin to flare out from him.

The dark thrall seemed to take on the form of massive wings that lightened to nearly blue at the tips.

"We fight to protect our own." The darksider, the demon, said firmly.

"You fight because others tell you to. They command you. They control you. That's contrary to the essence of what you are." Dodger said as he tried to make his thrall intensify.

The demon didn't seem to be swayed, but those behind him seemed to have lost any desire to fight and stood, waiting to see what their leader would do.

"You have someone immune to the bite in there. He's a threat to us." The demon said firmly.

"No. His father was immune. The boy, his name is Evan, he was bitten today and he was turned. He's not a threat to you... and neither am I. By the way, my name is Dodger."

"I am Hellfire!" The demon boomed fiercely.

Dodger didn't give the slightest acknowledgement to the announcement.

'Hellfire' seemed to be at a loss at the non-reaction and finally said, "But I used to be known as Wade."

"I'm sure that you've noticed that I have your men completely in my thrall. I think I could command them to attack you before you could gain control of them again. But what I'm saying isn't some kind of a mind trick. It's the truth. We have no reason to fight." Dodger said with conviction.

Wade considered the words for a moment, and seemed to be having difficulty forming a response.

"I don't want to kill you, but I will if I have to." Dodger said honestly, then quietly added, "Please don't make me have to."

The other darksiders that grouped around Wade were obviously waiting for his decision before doing anything more.

Dodger looked Wade in the eyes and said, "When I look at you, it's like looking into a mirror. You're what I might have been. I suppose that I could hate you for that, but I don't. All I want is for you to be able to live free in the dark and be what you were meant to be."

"We don't do mirrors, but... you know, you're probably going to regret this." Wade said honestly.

Knowing that the decision had been made, Dodger smiled slightly as he responded, "Probably. But regret is a part of life."

Wade gave a smirk as he said, "Not for me. Not anymore."

"If you go now, I'll make sure that no one follows you." Dodger said as he glanced around.

"I wouldn't do the same for you." Wade said as he motioned for his men to retreat.

"I know." Dodger said as he watched the band of fighters hurry back toward the trees.

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A laugh drew Dodger's attention and he turned in time to see Leila throw her sickle at the last remaining fighter.

The sickle missed by a mile and the fighter seemed amused by the poor throw, then Leila jerked on the chain on the sickle's handle and brought it back on perfect trajectory.

The darksider turned just in time to catch a glimpse of the sickle before it bit into his neck.

With another jerk on the chain, Leila brought the bloody sickle back to her. She hadn't managed to take the man's head off, but she had certainly dealt him a lethal blow.

Dodger looked around to see how everyone else was doing while defending his position.

To his right, Ernie and Blake were fighting in flawless unison. They used their swords to hack and slash at their opponents until their defenses were down, then stood aside to allow Manna to deliver the killing blow.

Beyond Ernie, Blake and Manna was Imelda, the dainty, frail, snip of a girl who always took his coat at the club. Tonight she was dressed in a flannel shirt and faded jeans and was holding a machete nearly half as long as she was tall. Her fangs were bared and the gleam in her eyes spoke of ruthlessness and a desire for blood.

Dodger very nearly missed another defender, standing back, out of Imelda's way. It was Rene, the head waiter. He was dressed as immaculately as ever, and was holding a foil in perfect position, obviously ready for a fight, should Imelda be overpowered.

After checking to be sure that no darksiders were coming toward him, Dodger looked to his left, past Rafe and Leila to find Lily fighting hand-to-hand as fierce as any beast in the wild. She was using nails and fangs to take her opponents down as viciously as possible. Behind her was Portia, holding an ax and staying alert for anyone trying to attack Lily while she was enjoying her prey.

As Dodger turned his attention forward again he saw more fighters emerging from the treeline.

Everyone seemed to be holding their own so far, but he was becoming concerned by the sheer number of opponents coming toward them.

Suddenly, a loud 'CRACK' sounded. Dodger dropped his sword as he brought his hands up to protect his super-sensitive ears.

Most everyone had stopped fighting and were doing the same.

The darksiders seemed to collectively decide that the interruption was the perfect time to fall back to reassess their strategy.

Seeing that it was safe for the moment, Dodger looked around for the source of the loud sound that had stopped the fighting.

Almost out of sight around the corner, he caught a glimpse of George, standing with a smoking sawed-off shotgun in his hand and a headless darksider at his feet.

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"Oh God!" Leila gasped when she saw the enemy forces advancing from the treeline.

Dodger's eyes went wide when he realized that before him were over a hundred darksiders.

"They must have brought every darksider East of the Mississippi in for this." Portia called from past Leila.

"Rafe, I hope you have a plan B because plan A isn't looking too good at the moment." Leila said in an anxious voice.

"Morgan is in charge of plan B, this is all I've got." Rafe said nervously.

"Morgan! Tell me you have an idea of how to deal with this." Leila called toward the front of the house.

"Yes. I do. And here it comes." Morgan said as he looked toward the driveway.

A black limousine slowly drove up the drive.

The darksiders moved out of it's way, allowing it free movement.

When the door opened, there was silence.

A tall man with the most breathtakingly beautiful golden blond hair stepped out of the back of the car. Even though it was dark, he seemed to radiate his own luminescence. His presence was awe inspiring.

Dodger looked at Rafe and saw that he was smiling.

The tall man reached a hand back into the car and received a small, delicate hand in his.

A stunningly beautiful woman, with milk pale skin and long flowing black hair, elegantly stood from the car.

The darksiders drew back from the couple, either out of fear or respect.

"Raphael." The man said as he escorted the delicate woman away from the car. "Would you care to tell us what is happening here?"

"Yes." Rafe said nervously. "But first, father, mother, I'd like for you to meet Dodger. Dodger, I'd like to present my mother, Ariadne and my father, Michael."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Some automated part of Dodger's brain said, since his entire consciousness was enthralled by the breathtakingly beautiful couple.

"I'm so glad to finally get to meet my son's one true love." Ariadne said gently.

Dodger felt her voice caress him, and embrace him. He blushed from his toes to his hairline.

"Now son, perhaps you could tell us why we were called here." Michael said seriously.

"Yes Father." Rafe said quietly. "You see, the darksiders attacked a boy and his mother this morning. She died and he was changed. Now they're attacking, hoping to get to him so they can finish what they started."

Michael looked at his son for a moment, then out across the sea of darksiders, who were all watching intently.

"Who speaks for you?" Michael called out in a voice that carried on the wind. The sound of it felt like a physical presence.

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"Is the boy here?" Ariadne asked Dodger gently.

"Yes, he's inside." Dodger answered immediately.

"Would you please get him?" Ariadne asked hopefully.

Dodger nodded, then dashed away.

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After a moment of rustling in the crowd, a man walked forward.

"By what name are you called?" Michael asked politely.

"Dupree." The man answered coldly.

"Would you tell me the source of your conflict?" Michael asked reasonably.

"This 'doctor', is trying to make a 'cure' so the world can be rid of people like me." Dupree said with a snarl at Rafe.

"Raphael? What say you to this?" Michael asked as he turned to look at his son.

"About forty years ago, a twelve year old boy named Jimmy was attacked by a group of darksiders. He was bitten at least a dozen times, but he didn't change. I tried to identify what it was about his blood that made him immune to the transformative, so that I could possibly make an antidote or an inoculation." Rafe said cautiously.

"And what about the boy today?" Michael asked slowly.

"His name is Evan, he's Jimmy's son. He seems to have bonded with the transformative, I think he was only partly changed. He may be the key for restoring humanity to the darksiders." Rafe said as he looked his father in the eyes and implored him to understand.

Michael closed his eyes and shook his head for a moment.

"Dupree, please accept my apologies for the actions of my son. I'm sure he did what he felt was best within his limited frame of reference." Michael said quietly.

"But what about him?" Dupree asked as he pointed at Evan, who was approaching with Dodger on one side and Kevin on the other.

"Allow me a moment and I'm sure I can find a resolution to your dispute." Michael said calmly, then beckoned Evan to come to him.

Ariadne immediately walked to Michael's other side, then the three walked away slowly, talking in hushed whispers.

Dupree looked at Rafe with disgust and growled, "Before the end of this night, I will feast on your blood."

Ariadne turned slightly and flashed Dupree and Rafe a warning glance, and they both stood a little straighter.

Dodger watched Evan carefully, hoping to get some sense of what they were talking about.

A surprised smile crossed Evan's face, then he grinned and nodded happily.

Ariadne smiled at his answer, then whispered something to him and gestured toward Dodger.

"Dupree, please accept my assurance that Evan will pose no threat to you and your people. I will see to it that no further research of this type will be done and that any existing research will be destroyed." Michael said seriously.

"You give YOUR word?" Dupree asked cautiously.

"Yes. I swear my solemn vow, here before all assembled, that this threat to you will be eliminated." Michael said in a voice that carried deep into the night.

"Then, if there is no other business, I will leave." Dupree said respectfully.

"There is one other matter." Ariadne said firmly.

Dupree looked at her curiously.

"Who is responsible for the death of this boy's mother?" Ariadne asked, and her words seemed to resonate in the air.

"I am." Laramie said as he stepped forward, to stand at Dupree's side.

"You ordered her death?" Ariadne asked as she looked him in the eyes.

"Yes." Laramie said as he met her gaze.

In the blink of an eye, there was a flash of silver in the moonlight. Before anyone could register that she had moved, her hand was back at her side, holding a razor sharp silver rapier.

Laramie looked at her with disbelief for a moment, then his head fell back... then off.

"Killing this boy's mother was completely unnecessary and NOT acceptable behavior." Ariadne said as she looked around the assembled crowd. "THIS is the consequence of unacceptable behavior."

There was a long moment of silence for everyone to absorb the words, then Michael said, "Dupree, you and your associates may leave."

Dupree glanced at Rafe, then reluctantly turned to leave.

"Raphael." Michael said firmly.

Rafe stood a little straighter at the tone.

"In the house. NOW!" Michael commanded.

Dupree glanced back over his shoulder and smirked before continuing on his journey into the dark.

"Dodger, please thank everyone for coming." Rafe said before following his father into the house.

Dodger hugged Evan around the shoulders as he nodded.

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"Everyone, before you go, Rafe wants me to let all of you know that we appreciate you coming to help." Dodger said loudly.

Several nods and friendly waves were the responses from most of the assembled crowd.

"Let Rafe know that I'll see that this is taken care of before morning." Morgan said as he gestured to one of the bodies on the front lawn.

"Thank you, Morgan... For everything." Dodger said sincerely.

Morgan gave a single nod, then walked away.

"Evan, come over here, I'd like for you to meet some people." Dodger said gently to the boy at his side.

Ariadne watched with a gentle smile, then followed the pair silently.

"Leila, this is Evan." Dodger said quickly.

Evan stared at the exotic, beautiful woman in skin tight leather and high heels.

"It's nice to meet you Evan. I'm so glad that things worked out so that you'll be safe." Leila said warmly.

"Thank you." Evan said past his amazement.

Leila giggled at his reaction, then said, "Excuse me, but I need to catch up with Lily and Portia before they leave."

"Thank you for all your help. You were amazing... you're always amazing." Dodger said with a smile.

Leila giggled again, then gave Dodger and Evan each a kiss on the cheek before hurrying away.

"Wow. She's beautiful." Evan said in a whisper.

"Yes. In many ways." Dodger said with admiration, then quickly said, "Come over here, you need to meet these guys."

Evan stayed close to Dodger's side as they walked to a small group of people.

Ariadne followed at a distance, apparently pleased by what she was witnessing.

"Evan, I'd like for you to meet Manna and her husbands, Ernie and Blake." Dodger said happily.

"It's nice to meet you." Evan said hesitantly, then looked at Dodger with question.

"Evan, these are some of the smartest guys I know. If you ever have a problem, and I'm not around to help you, talk to them." Dodger said warmly.

Ernie and Blake had identical blushes at the statement.

"I'm glad someone besides me has noticed." Manna said from between her husbands, looking back and forth at them adoringly.

"Once things have settled down around here, I'd really like it if you three would come up for dinner. We don't get to visit nearly enough." Dodger said sincerely.

"Consider us there." Ernie said with a grin.

"We would love to." Blake said with his mirror opposite grin.

"It looks like everyone else is leaving. Evan and I should get inside, Rafe may need us." Dodger said with a worried look back at the house.

"If there's anything we can do..." Ernie began.

"...be sure to call us." Blake finished.

"Count on it." Dodger said warmly.

"It was nice to meet you." Evan said quickly.

"It was very nice to meet you too, Evan." Manna said gently.

Ernie, Blake and Manna started walking toward the driveway as Dodger and Evan started walking toward the house.

Before they reached the door, Ariadne had joined them.

* * * * *

Dodger and Evan shared a concerned look. They couldn't make out all of the conversation that was taking place in the study, but occasionally they would hear Rafe say, "But Daaaad."

"Don't worry about Raphael. Michael understands that he was trying to do the right thing as he understood it." Ariadne said as she casually put a hand on Evan's shoulder and gave him the gentlest of hugs.

"I don't understand what he did wrong?" Dodger said frankly.

"He was trying to create a biological weapon to destroy his enemies." Ariadne said frankly. "Genocide is wrong."

"But they're evil." Dodger said slowly.

"They're predators. They do what they were made to do. Just as you do what you were made to do. You have different states of being from them, but seeking to destroy them isn't the answer. Perhaps they're the other side of the coin, but they are part of you. Darksiders and shadesiders are the same people, they just turned out differently."

"But they kill people." Dodger said in confusion.

"Brightsiders kill people. Shadesiders sometimes kill people. You think it's different because your reasons are right and their reasons are wrong?" Ariadne asked simply.

"But... what are we supposed to do?" Dodger asked slowly.

"Basically, the shadesiders need to do what they've been doing. Keeping the darksiders from getting out of control and keeping the brightsiders from finding out what's really going on in the night... They're so fragile."

Dodger giggled at the statement and nodded his agreement, then thought to ask, "Why did the darksiders do as you said and believe Michael when he gave his word?"

Ariadne smiled at the question, then answered, "All the young ones recognize the ancients, it's carried in their blood. The knowledge is entwined in their instincts."

"How old are you?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Dodger!" Ariadne scolded playfully. "Hasn't anyone told you not to ask a woman her age?"

"I'm sorry." Dodger stammered quickly.

Ariadne giggled, then said, "I understand. But I'm afraid that I don't have an exact answer to your question."

Dodger looked at Ariadne curiously, but didn't ask why.

"Let's just say that the modern calendar wasn't in use when I was your age." Ariadne said with a glowing smile.

Dodger's eyes went wide as he realized what she was saying.

After a moment, Ariadne gently asked, "Do you love my son?"

"Yes. With all my heart and soul." Dodger answered immediately.

She smiled at the answer, then said, "That's all I ever wanted for him."

"I thought you wanted him to be with Leila." Dodger said cautiously.

"I wanted him to find true love. Leila is a lovely girl and I thought with the proper encouragement, that it could work." She said gently. "It didn't, but not fifty years later, he found you. I'm not disappointed at all in the way things turned out. My boy is happy, that's all that matters."

"I agree." Dodger said with a smile, then noticed that Evan was asleep, snuggled up against Ariadne's side.

"I wonder what's going to happen to him?" Dodger asked quietly.

"Michael and I have already promised him that when we leave, he will be going with us." Ariadne said gently, then leaned down to place a kiss on top of Evan's head.

"He hasn't had time to grieve for his mother yet. And now he's found out that his father is dead too." Dodger said with concern for the innocent looking boy.

"It will be difficult. Life sometimes is." Ariadne said quietly. "In time, he's going to have to make some decisions about what he wants to happen next. After that, Michael and I will help him make those dreams into realities."

"Whatever he decides, I just hope he's happy." Dodger said with a tender smile at Evan.

"We'll see to that." Ariadne said assuringly, "He will be."

* * * * *

Dodger looked up to see Rafe and his father walk out of the study, side by side.

"It looks like everything is okay." Dodger said hopefully.

Rafe looked at his father, then said, "I guess you're never too old to need some good advice."

"With age comes a certain perspective." Michael said as he hugged his son fondly. "It doesn't occur to the young that it might be of value until times like this."

Kevin walked into the room, then looked around, uncertain of his welcome.

When Dodger noticed, he made a summoning gesture and said, "Please, join us."

Kevin reluctantly walked into the room, then took a seat in one of the chairs, opposite the sofa.

"Is something wrong?" Dodger asked hesitantly, noticing something like apprehension or guilt in Kevin's expression.

"I did something... I invited someone to come here tonight. I hope that's okay." Kevin said cautiously.

"Of course it is." Rafe said immediately. "Although, I didn't know you were seeing anyone."

"No. It's nothing like that." Kevin said uncomfortably. "You see, after I found out that Evan was here, I called a friend of a friend to extend the invitation. It's one of Kaplan's people."

Rafe looked at Kevin with surprise.

"Kaplan?" Michael asked curiously.

"He leads a small group of shadesiders that believe in living completely in the brightside world. They avoid the Shadeside community as much as possible." Rafe said, then noticed Kevin's stooped posture and look of anxiety. "I'm sure you had a good reason to invite him. So it's fine."

"I just..." Kevin began to say, when there was a knock at the door.

"I've got it." Bruce said as he hurried from the library, toward the front door.

At Dodger's look of question, Rafe said, "He just want's to make sure it's someone friendly."

"If they weren't friendly, do you think they would knock?" Dodger asked frankly.

"They might, just to throw us off guard." Rafe said with a gentle smile.

"I'm sorry." Evan said as he straightened at Ariadne's side and blinked his eyes. "I must have fallen asleep."

"That's fine, Evan. I'm sure you've earned your rest today." Ariadne said gently.

Evan looked embarrassed, but then relaxed under her loving gaze.

"Raphael, I'm sorry to intrude on your home, but I was told that we were needed here." A man said as he entered the room.

"That's fine Collin. Kevin told us that he invited you, so you're welcome here." Rafe said as he stood.

The man looked behind him to usher a timid boy to come fully into the room.

"Brian?" Evan asked with surprise at the sight of the teenager, then stood quickly to run to his side.

"Evan? You're here?" Brian asked with astonishment.

Everyone watched as Evan pulled Brian into a firm hug.

"This is Brian." Evan said happily as he guided his friend to walk into the living room.

"It's nice to meet you Brian. You're welcome here." Rafe said gently, recognizing the anxiety in the younger boy's eyes.

Brian seemed to be about to say something when his gaze fixed on Michael and Ariadne.

"Please be at ease, Brian." Michael said with a radiant smile.

"Come and sit with us." Ariadne said warmly.

Evan guided Brian to sit with him on the couch beside Michael and Ariadne.

Collin walked into the room more slowly, still looking unsure of his welcome when he saw Michael and Ariadne.

"The ancients!" He gasped, then bowed and said, "Please forgive our intrusion, eldest and most honored."

"Be at ease. As my son has said, you are welcome here." Michael said gently.

Dodger got up and went across the room to grab one of the wingback chairs by the fireplace.

When Bruce saw what he was doing, he hurried over to grab the other one.

"Please have a seat, Collin." Rafe said, sounding to be much more at ease with Collin's presence.

"Thank you." Collin said nervously, then took the seat that Dodger had vacated.

"So Evan, I'm guessing that Brian is a friend of yours." Ariadne said gently to Brian and Evan at her side.

"Yes. I thought that I'd never be able to see him again." Evan said as he held tightly to Brian.

"And why would that be?" Michael asked curiously.

"Well, when I got bitten and... um, changed. I thought that it would mean that I couldn't have any normal... I mean, brightsider friends." Evan said nervously.

"That's what a lot of your people think." Collin said frankly, then seemed to regret his words.

"We've never told anyone that they can't befriend the brightsiders, only that it sometimes causes stress when you have to hide certain things." Rafe said seriously.

"And it can be a problem if things move beyond friendship." Dodger added quietly, with a significant look at Rafe.

"Well, from the look of it, Brian and Evan won't have to worry about that." Ariadne said with a smile at the boys.

"But you said that I needed to go with you." Evan said suddenly, looking worried.

"Yes. I think that would be best." Ariadne said gently.

"But I don't want to leave Brian. I... I really like him." Evan finished in a whisper, then looked at Brian to see his reaction.

"I really like you too." Brian admitted shyly.

"Collin, we know nothing of your situation. Could you tell us if this development poses any insurmountable problem?" Michael asked seriously.

"Brian is free to stay or go as he pleases." Collin said frankly, "Since his change, he has been living as my nephew, and has been searching for a place to fit into the brightside world."

"I've finished high school, but I look too young for anyone to give me a decent job or anything." Brian said shyly, then turned to Evan and continued, "That's why I was hanging around the park the night that I met you. After that, I kept going to the park hoping to talk to you again."

"Can Brian come with us?" Evan asked hopefully, looking from Ariadne to Michael hopefully.

After a moment of thought, Michael said, "Brian, it appears that Evan is of unique heritage. There are those, both darksider and shadesider, who would use him for their own purposes. We know that he would be safe in our company. If you would care to join us in our travels, you would be welcome."

Brian looked at Michael, then at Collin with question.

"Follow your heart, Brian." Collin said gently. "If things don't work out the way you want, you'll always have a place in my home."

"That goes for you too, Evan. If you decide that you want to settle down, you'll always have a place here with us." Rafe said honestly, then added, "Both of you."

"Yes. Both of you." Collin agreed.

"And there's a ranch in New Mexico where I know that you'd be welcomed." Bruce said seriously. "Everyone there loved your father as if he was their own kid. They'd take you in and love you as one of their own if you'd let them."

"What is this ranch?" Michael asked curiously.

"It's a group of shadesiders who live on a ranch on the continental divide, completely away from brightsiders." Bruce said frankly.

"Separatists." Collin said in a slightly disgusted tone.

"If their choice allows them to lead happy and fulfilled lives, then it's the right one for them. Just as Raphael's is right for him and yours is right for you." Ariadne said simply.

"And we would be doing Brian and Evan no favors if we tried to shelter them from differing points of view." Michael added seriously.

"Yes. I can see that." Collin admitted reluctantly.

"I think enough decisions have been made for one day." Ariadne said seriously. "Raphael, would you have room for us to stay the night?"

"Of course, Mother." Rafe said with a smile. "And we have a room for you too, Evan."

"And a room for Brian, if he would like to spend the night." Dodger added quickly.

"I... um." Brian stammered, but after a nod from Collin, said, "Yes. Thank you."

"Kevin, do you think you could arrange to retrieve Evan's clothes and things?" Rafe asked hopefully.

"Yes. I'll have them here by morning." Kevin said, then smiled at Evan's happiness.

"I'll bring Brian's things too." Collin said seriously.

"I don't know about anyone else, but I was so nervous that I didn't eat very much dinner." Dodger announced to the room in general. "I'm going to get the food back out so we can try again. All of you are welcomed to join us."

"Thank you, but I have things that I need to do." Kevin said, sounding slightly regretful.

"As do I, but thank you for the invitation." Collin said as he also stood.

"I'm hungry enough to eat the ass end out of a moose, so I'm not going anywhere." Bruce said frankly, then blushed at Michael and Ariadne's matching surprised stares.

"Sorry." He whispered.

"Quite alright." Michael said with a grin, then turned to Dodger and said, "But I hope that won't be an indication of what's on the menu."

"No." Dodger said with a chuckle, "We're fresh out of moose. But I'll come up with something."

"We don't visit the colonies often. I'm never sure what to make of your cuisine." Michael said hesitantly.

"We've been a country for over two hundred years, Dad. I think it's time that you accept that we're not going to change our minds." Rafe said with a grin at his father.

"Old habits..." Michael said with a shrug.

"Would you boys like to help me in the kitchen?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"Sure." Evan said immediately, then looked at Brian with question.

"Yeah." Brian said shyly, then walked with Evan to join Dodger at the kitchen door.

* * * * *

"Is it going to cause you a problem, having Evan and Brian with you?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"No." Michael said immediately. "In recent years we've been feeling somewhat adrift... lacking purpose."

Ariadne nodded agreement to her husband's words, then said, "This may be just what we've needed to draw us back into the world that seems to have moved on without us."

Rafe nodded slowly, then quietly said, "Evan has a lot to deal with. He's going to need a lot of support."

"Dodger told us that he lost his mother today, and only just found out about his father. " Ariadne said seriously.

"Then the violence of the attack and the change that he went through... I just don't know if he's strong enough to handle so much at once." Rafe said with concern.

"I think that with encouragement from all of us, that he may come through the experience." Michael said thoughtfully.

"I'm really glad you're here. How did you get here so soon?" Rafe asked curiously.

"We were on our way to Brazil when we got the call. It was simply a matter of diverting a flight." Michael said casually.

"The other passengers seemed to be a bit upset to find themselves landing in Ohio." Ariadne said distantly.

"But Morgan called and said that you needed us. So we came." Michael added as he looked into Rafe's eyes.

"I always need you." Rafe said quietly. "I would really like it if you could visit more often. It's been almost a hundred years since the last time I've seen you."

"We wanted to give you space, my angel." Ariadne said tenderly.

Rafe glanced over to see Bruce trying to hide a smile at the pet name.

"I think I've had enough space, now I'd like to spend time with my family." Rafe said honestly.

"We would like that, too." Michael said with a smile.

"And we would love to get to know Dodger. He seems like a wonderful boy." Ariadne said warmly.

"He's the best." Rafe said happily.

"You know," Michael said to his wife slowly, "I think Buenos Aires could get through one carnival without us."

Ariadne nodded, then said, "And Evan should really have some time to adjust to his new circumstances before we whisk him away from everything he has ever known."

"You're welcome to stay as long as you want." Rafe said happily.

"Thank you, Raphael. We would be honored to accept your gracious invitation." Michael said formally.

* * * * *

"What do you need for us to do?" Evan asked as he walked into the kitchen with Brian at his side.

"Would you go to the basement for me?" Dodger asked seriously.

"Um, sure. What do you need from down there?" Evan asked slowly, remembering that the basement only had a little bit of furniture in it.

"I just got the feeling that you might like it if you were away from the crowd of people." Dodger said as he pulled the roast from the refrigerator.

"Don't you need our help?" Evan asked with confusion.

"Evan, you've been through a lot today. Brian, you've had to hide who and what you are from Evan since the day you first met." Dodger said frankly. "I think the best thing for the two of you will be to have some time to yourselves. Talk. Share. Cry if you need to. Hug if you need to."

Evan seemed to be lost in thought, but Brian was nodding his agreement.

"Go on. Come back up when you're done and I'll have dinner waiting for you." Dodger said with a smile at Brian.

Evan looked at Dodger appraisingly for a moment, then whispered, "I love you, Dodger."

"I love you, too, Evan." Dodger said warmly, "Now go."

Evan smiled, then led Brian away so they could talk.

The End... of Part 4

Part 5: Of Darkness and Night

Chapter 17

'So this is what it feels like to be a whore.' Lane thought to himself as he felt the loneliness settle in. He pulled his blankets tightly around his shoulders to reassure himself. The feeling being almost like a hug.

The room felt empty and cold... and so did he.

Just an hour before, he had thought he had finally found someone to love him.

He had thought that, for once in his life, he had found a person who didn't think he was too skinny or too much of a geek to be loved. He thought that maybe all the poets and romance novelists were right and there really was someone for everyone. Even him.

For just the briefest moment, he felt special.

He felt loved.

Cherished.

But now...

Lane felt the tears welling up in his eyes and turned to bury his face into the pillows to cry.

Everything had been so perfect.

He met Julian waiting in line outside a little diner called Tommy's. It was just a chance meeting of two strangers who had nothing better to do than to talk as they waited for a table to come available. By the time they reached the front of the line, they had chosen to have dinner together. Within minutes of talking, it was like they had known each other for years.

Lane had never been able to talk to anyone so easily before. Julian was comfortable, friendly and seemed to be genuinely interested in him.

The conversation over dinner had been mostly generic, but both he and Julian had seemed to be fascinated by it and there had been that proverbial 'chemistry' that romance writers love to go on about.

They had shared laughs and tender glances. It was like something out of a story book.

As his tears soaked the pillow, Lane thought about how he had taken a chance and invited his new friend to come back to his apartment so they could continue their conversation after the diner had closed.

That was the only awkward moment of the evening. But Julian had gratefully accepted the invitation, seeming to be as excited by the idea as he was.

As Lane thought back, it seemed that the moment they were inside the door, Lane found his pants were around his ankles and Julian was doing things to him that he had only fantasized about before.

Julian had said that he was 18, the same as Lane, but Lane had his doubts. In fact, he suspected from the way he introduced himself, that Julian wasn't even his real name. But in the heat of the moment, none of that mattered.

Lane could feel the ache from their lovemaking... or at least, at the time, he had thought that it was love.

After nearly two hours of incredible sex that was beyond anything Lane had ever heard of or imagined, his 'lover' suddenly announced that he had to leave.

It was like a slap in the face.

He felt like the most naive child for allowing himself to be used and discarded.

Lane hated to admit, if even only to himself, that he had felt something, that he had given his heart to Julian.

Finally feeling an end to the tears, Lane lifted his head and his breath caught in his throat.

Blood.

His pillow was soaked with blood.

Ice ran through Lane as he stumbled out of bed and ran to the bathroom to look in the mirror.

* * * * *

Numb horror washed through Lane as he stared at the trails of blood running down his cheeks.

"Oh my God!" Lane gasped as his mind raced.

"No. No. This can't be happening." Lane whispered to himself, somehow hoping that his giving voice to the words would make them true.

Finally, a thought came to him and he straightened with panic.

"No. It can't be that." Lane muttered as he ran back into the bedroom and grabbed the small trash can from beside the bed.

"Don't be." Lane said as he pulled out one of the used condoms. "Just don't!"

Before he could even get it fully out of the trash can, his heart sank.

The semen was dripping out of the end of the condom, it was leaking like a sieve.

He pulled the next one out of the trash to find that the end of it was completely shredded.

"Fuck!" Lane said as his tears started flowing again.

Sitting on the floor beside his bed, Lane pulled his knees up to his chest and started to cry in earnest.

* * * * *

When he was finally out of tears, Lane forced himself to stand and walked to the bathroom again.

He needed to be rational and decide what he was supposed to do next.

It seemed obvious that Julian had done something to him. Given him some disease. But before he ran off to the emergency room in a panic, he needed to try and figure out what disease it was that he had.

Some research on the Internet revealed that what he had seemed to be a condition called haemolacria, and that it was not at all dangerous.

The condition seemed to occur spontaneously, sometimes as a result of a trauma, and there wasn't really any treatment for it. According to the articles that he read, it would eventually just stop on it's own.

Lane felt relief wash through him at the information. Julian hadn't given him some horrible disease, he had just screwed him so hard that it made his eyes bleed.

As Lane thought back on the night, he had to admit that the sex had been vigorous enough to knock something loose.

With a smile, Lane went about the business of tidying up his small apartment and he took the pillowcase to the sink to try and wash the blood out.

He noticed that he was feeling strange, like he was suddenly becoming aware of the texture of everything that he touched.

Lane marveled at the sensation of the texture of the wet pillowcase in his hands. It was like he could feel each individual thread and how they wove together.

* * * * *

Without warning, Lane felt his stomach begin to constrict.

He barely had time to turn to the toilet before he started vomiting.

Just as suddenly as it started, it stopped.

He waited for a moment, in case it started again, but his stomach felt perfectly fine now.

Lane walked to the sink and drew a glass of water to rinse his mouth out.

He puzzled over the fact that he didn't feel the least bit sick. A bit hot, perhaps, but not queasy or anything else that would indicate that he was unwell.

After a moment to consider, Lane finally concluded that it must be his nerves. Mind blowing sex, then getting dumped, then crying blood... yeah, it was enough reason for his stomach to rebel.

* * * * *

Lane cleaned up the bathroom and decided that he should try to get some sleep.

He was used to staying up late, since he worked the late night shift at the video store. Or at least he had until two weeks ago.

His boss had called him into the office and fired him.

"Things are tight right now. Last hired, first fired." The big jerk had said by way of explanation.

As Lane sat down on his bed, he noticed the time and smiled.

Rather than lay down, he scooted over so he was within easy reach of the phone.

He had to wait for less than a minute before the phone started ringing.

"Hi Dad." Lane said with a grin.

"Good morning, Lane. I didn't wake you, did I?"

"No. I was just about to go to bed." Lane said gently.

"You stayed up all night? That's not going to help you with your job hunting."

"It's Saturday, Dad. No job hunting today or tomorrow." Lane said frankly.

"Are you okay? You sound funny."

Lane let out a sigh, then quietly said, "I had a one night stand last night. I'm kind of bummed out about it."

"Oh. I hope you were safe."

"We tried to be. But the condom broke. I'll stop by the clinic for a test while I'm out job hunting next week." Lane said with resignation.

"Try not to let it get you down. I know there's got to be a special person out there just waiting for you."

"That's the part that has me so depressed. The guy last night... I really liked him." Lane said as he felt the tears welling up in his eyes again.

"What did he do? Hold on, let me rephrase that. What did he say before he left?"

"He told me that he was sorry, but he really needed to be somewhere before sunrise." Lane said quietly.

"Son, maybe he was telling you the truth."

"Or maybe he was just blowing me off." Lane said frankly.

"If you really like him, think about accepting what he said and try not to read anything more into it."

"Why?" Lane asked curiously.

"Because sometimes, very rarely, I grant you, but *sometimes* people say exactly what they mean."

Lane thought about it for a moment, then said, "Okay Dad. If I ever see this guy again, I'll give him the benefit of the doubt."

"Good boy."

"How's mom?" Lane asked cautiously.

"She's a bit upset with me at the moment."

"Because you paid my rent?" Lane asked cautiously.

"In a word, yes."

"Well, if she would rather, I could just move back home." Lane said frankly.

"I'll suggest that to her."

"Yeah. That should shut her up." Lane said with a tinge of bitterness in his tone.

"Please try to understand that she was raised by some very strict and religious people."

"Yeah. I can see that. A person doesn't learn to hate that much without some help." Lane said flatly.

"I've got to go. I'll call you tomorrow."

"Thanks for risking her wrath to call me. I really appreciate it." Lane said sincerely.

"I love you son. Always remember that."

"I love you, too, Dad."

* * * * *

As Lane settled in to sleep, a sudden urge came over him.

He rushed into the bathroom and had barely come to rest on the toilet before his bowels unleashed their fury.

Lane felt like a tube of toothpaste and every last little bit was being squeezed out of him.

"Oh my God!" Lane gasped when it finally seemed to be over.

* * * * *

"This has been some kind of a day." Lane said as he crawled between the sheets.

He felt thirsty, but decided that it would be too much trouble for him to get out of the bed to deal with it.

Sleep quickly claimed him.

* * * * *

Hungry.

Thirsty.

Ravenous.

Lane woke and couldn't remember ever feeling so hungry in his life.

As soon as his feet hit the floor, he nearly ran to the kitchen to find something to eat.

The first food that he encountered was a sleeve of Oreo cookies that he had been working on for nearly a week.

He popped one into his mouth as he walked to the refrigerator, hoping to find something to drink to sate his thirst.

When the taste of the Oreo registered, he began to cough and choke.

The cloying sweetness of the cookie was way too intense for him to even consider eating.

He spat the cookie into the garbage, then ran to the sink to rinse out his mouth.

As he was rinsing, he felt a strange sensation, like a fluttering in his cheeks, just under his eyes.

He reached up to rub the strange twitching sensations.

"Oh God!" He gasped. "What now?"

Lane nearly tripped over his own feet trying to make his way to the bathroom.

When he got to the mirror, he opened his mouth and tried to get a clue of what might be making the weird moving sensation behind his cheekbones.

Just when he resigned himself to the fact that he couldn't see anything, he noticed something curious about his reflection.

Lane drew up his upper lip and bared his teeth.

As he stared in horror, his canines began to move forward and drop down to hang nearly half an inch farther down than the rest of his teeth.

"Fuck." Lane gasped as he stared at himself.

"What..." He began to ask, when the answer seemed to supply itself to his mind.

"Oh no. Fuck, no. Not that." Lane muttered to himself as he raced out of the bathroom and into his bedroom.

Just to prove to himself that it wasn't what he was thinking, he threw the blackout window blind back to allow the daylight to shine into the room.

* * * * *

Lane would have screamed if all the wind hadn't suddenly been knocked out of his body.

He found himself laying on the bedroom floor about three feet from the window.

Fortunately, the blackout blind had fallen back into place and recovered the window when he fell.

He looked down at his hands and saw that they were bright red, as though they had been scalded.

Lane rested back and tried to just endure the pain. Every bit of exposed skin was throbbing.

"Vampire." He whispered to himself. "I'm a fucking vampire."

He felt the tears threatening to fall, but fought them down.

'When I came out to my dad, he was great, but I think this might be too much, even for him.' Lane thought to himself.

'Of course, Mom's convinced that I'm the spawn of Satan because I'm gay, so I'm pretty sure her opinion of me couldn't get any lower.' Lane thought bitterly.

'I haven't been bitten. But I've only had physical contact with one person in the past two weeks.' Lane thought slowly.

"Julian." Lane gasped as he sat up. "You had to be somewhere before sunrise."

"I just bet you did. Back in your coffin." Lane said as he stood.

He looked curiously down at his hands to see that they were just a little bit pink now.

"God, I'm hungry!" Lane said aloud, then realized just what that meant.

"Fuck! Of course I'm not hungry for food." Lane said with wonder.

'What the hell am I going to do?' Lane thought as he looked around his bedroom aimlessly.

His gaze finally settled on the clock and he realized that it was after 4pm.

'Okay. The sun will probably be down in an hour or so. Then I can go out and find something... or someone to eat.' Lane thought to himself anxiously.

* * * * *

He sat for a few minutes, then walked to the kitchen, hoping to find something to prove that it was all a mistake.

After a moment of looking through the cupboard over the stove, he found the container of garlic powder.

He took a deep breath to brace himself, then opened the container to take a quick inhale.

At least that's what he intended.

The stench of the garlic filled his nostrils and immediately caused him to choke.

He quickly screwed the top back onto the garlic powder, then ran out of the kitchen, gasping for breath.

"Daylight, garlic... I don't have a cross or holy water to try and prove it that way." Lane muttered to himself as he felt his hunger gnawing.

Lane walked into the bedroom and began to dress.

He didn't know if he was going to be able to bite someone and drink their blood. But he was certain that he would starve to death if he stayed inside.

* * * * *

As the sun finally made it's way below the horizon, Lane opened the door of his apartment and ventured out into the hallway.

He saw Mrs. Shannon from the next apartment.

The thought only crossed his mind for a moment as she greeted him.

If he were going to commit murder so that he could eat, he would at least do it to someone he didn't know... or didn't like.

He was as polite as possible and got away from her then hurried downstairs and out of the apartment building as quickly as he could.

Once he was out on the street, he had to decide where he wanted to go to get a 'bite'.

He didn't even consider taking his car, mostly because it ran so unreliably.

It wouldn't do him much good to try to flee from the scene of a crime in a car that wouldn't start.

His legs carried him away from his apartment and toward downtown where people tended to congregate.

Lane's anxiety increased as he tried to tell himself that what he was about to do was a matter of survival.

* * * * *

By the time he found himself in the park, he had come to the conclusion that it was going to be a matter of whether his hunger was strong enough to overcome his humanity.

He wasn't an evil person.

He had never had the desire to hurt anyone.

Okay, maybe a few of the guys in school who used to tease him because he was skinny, but he never would have really hurt them.

Then again, if he ran into one of those jerks tonight... he might be able to do it.

Lane looked around and found that he was in a nice little secluded area of the park.

If someone happened along, he wouldn't have to worry about anyone else seeing what he was doing.

All he had to do now was wait and see.

After a few minutes a woman came along, pushing a baby stroller.

No way.

He didn't care how evil he ever became, he couldn't leave a child motherless just to feed himself. He'd rather die.

Movement drew his attention and he just barely saw an alley cat slinking at the edge of the bushes.

He considered for a moment, then shook his head. Even if he could catch the thing, he didn't think he would be able to feed on it.

'After all the hell I went through when I came out, I'm not about to start eating pussy now.' Lane thought with an internal chuckle.

Before he could think much more about it, a pair of joggers came running in tandem down the path.

They were obviously a couple and looked like they were really happy.

And, of course, they were jogging, which meant that they were really trying to be strong and healthy.

Him making them dead wouldn't be a very nice thing to do.

As Lane considered, a thought came to him.

Maybe he should be looking in a bad part of town.

If he were to bite a drug dealer or a pimp, he really wouldn't be doing something so bad.

Then again, what would that blood be like?

Yeah, it'd be just his luck to bite someone who was so high on crack that he didn't even know where he was. And then Lane would have that to deal with on top of the hunger.

What effect would the tainted blood have on him? Would he get high too?

And what if he became addicted to addicts?

What if he had to go out and find two or three crack heads a week just to support his habit?

Just as he was about to give up and start walking toward the 'bad' side of town, Lane saw a timid boy walking alone.

He looked to be about fourteen or fifteen years old.

Lane felt a cold numbness wash over him as his hunger told him that this was the one.

He tried to fight down the emotions that were telling him that this boy deserved a chance at life, the opportunity to grow up and become an adult.

The boy looked around the small clearing, then looked at Lane curiously.

It didn't matter. His hunger had made the decision for him, and now he had to follow through with it.

"I'm sorry." Lane muttered as he took a step toward the boy.

"What?" The boy asked in confusion.

"I'm... I'm really sorry." Lane said as tears started falling down his cheeks.

"Is something wrong? Do you need help?" The boy asked with concern as he approached.

The teenager was being nice and Lane wanted to run away and leave him alone.

But his hunger was pushing him onward, forcing him to do what he had to do to survive.

"I don't want to... but I have to." Lane tried to explain as tears dripped off his chin.

The boy stopped and stared at Lane, still looking concerned.

"I'm really, really sorry." Lane said sincerely, then gave the little 'push' that made his fangs drop down. "I have to."

The boy's eyes went wide as he realized what was about to happen.

Before Lane could take the one step to claim his meal and finally satisfy his hunger, the boy dodged out of the way.

"Back off." The boy growled.

Lane turned and saw that the boy was looking at him with a vicious look in his eyes, and... he had fangs, too.

"I... you're..." Lane said as he froze in place and everything seemed to be spinning.

Blackness began to fill the edges of Lane's vision.

"I'm sorry." Lane whispered one last time before the blackness narrowed to a pinpoint, then the world went away.

Chapter 18

"What did you do?" Brian asked in horror as he rushed into the clearing.

"It's not what it looks like!" Evan said quickly. "He's a darksider!"

"He doesn't smell like one." Brian said slowly.

"I know. That's what I thought too, but he bared his fangs at me." Evan said desperately. "I swear!"

"What did you do to him?" Brian asked as he looked at the young man crumpled on the ground.

"Nothing. I mean, this guy bared his fangs at me, so I bared mine back at him... and then he passed out." Evan said in a voice of puzzlement.

"Do you think we should, you know... finish him off?" Brian asked cautiously.

"With what? The file on my fingernail clippers?" Evan asked frankly.

"Right... what do you want to do?" Brian asked as he stared at the skinny teenager laying on the ground at his feet.

"I know we're supposed to be staying with Uncle Collin right now, but I'd really like to call Mom." Evan said honestly.

"Isn't she all the way out at your brother's house?" Brian asked cautiously.

"No. Mom and Dad were supposed to meet with Morgan today. They're probably still at his office." Evan said quickly. "I really think they'd handle this better than Collin would."

"Yeah. I was kind of thinking the same thing." Brian admitted reluctantly. "Collin isn't always the most reasonable person to deal with."

"Besides, this guy, he didn't really act like a darksider." Evan said as he took out his cell phone.

"How do you mean?" Brian asked curiously.

"He kept saying over and over how sorry he was." Evan said quietly, then said into the phone, "Hi Mom. I was just sort of ambushed by a darksider in the park."

"No. We're fine. But, I don't know, something seems weird about the guy who wanted to bite me. As soon as I bared my fangs, he passed out." Evan said slowly.

"Yeah. We're at Schiller Park. Is there any way you could come and get us?" Evan asked hopefully.

"Great! We're not too far from the entrance. If you can come and get us, we'll meet you at 3rd and Reinhard." Evan said in concentration.

"We'll carry him. I don't think he's going to try to hurt us." Evan said, then looked at Brian hopefully.

Brian nodded, then knelt down to pick up the unconscious young man.

"Okay. We'll see you then." Evan said more gently.

"I love you, too." Evan said with a smile, then quickly added, "So does Brian."

Brian looked up with an exaggerated expression of surprise.

"Well, you do." Evan said as he closed the phone.

Brian chuckled, then said, "Yeah. I do."

"Do you need some help with him?" Evan asked with concern.

"No. This guy probably doesn't weigh a hundred pounds." Brian said frankly.

Evan looked at the young man with concern as they started walking toward the park entrance.

* * * * *

"You can put him in the trunk." Ariadne said as she stepped out of the car.

"Mom, I'd really rather not." Evan said slowly. "I'm not sure he's really a darksider."

"You said that he attacked you." Ariadne said reasonably.

"Yes. But I think maybe he's a shadesider who doesn't know what that means." Evan said seriously.

"Put him in the trunk and we'll sort it out when we get to your brother's house.

Evan smiled at the thought of his newly adopted brother, while Brian gently placed the unconscious teenager in the trunk.

"You there. What are you doing?" A uniformed police officer called as he hurried to the car.

"We're just going for a drive, it's a lovely evening for it." Ariadne said as she looked at the police officer sweetly.

"I... um, yes. Lovely." He finally responded.

"But I need to take my children home, it's getting late." Ariadne said gently, then asked, "Will there be anything else?"

"No. Have a good evening." He said quickly.

"You, too, officer." Ariadne said with a smile, then got into the car.

* * * * *

"You're not being a very good example for your impressionable boys by zapping a policeman like that." Evan said with a teasing grin.

"Nonsense. I'm being a perfect example. I want both of you to be able to 'zap' anyone that you need to in an emergency. And some people would consider having a police officer witnessing you putting a body into the trunk of your car as something of an emergency." Ariadne said seriously.

"Do we need to go pick up Dad or are we going straight to Rafe's?" Evan asked curiously.

"No, Morgan and your father are busy scheming and plotting. It could easily go on for a few more hours." Ariadne said with a fond chuckle. "Morgan will see to it that Michael get's home."

"Are you going to be okay to drive all the way to Rafe's?" Evan asked with concern.

"I've been driving since the invention of the automobile." Ariadne said simply.

"Since the invention of the chariot." Evan said under his breath.

Brian let out a laugh at the comment.

"I heard that." Ariadne said with a grin, but didn't dispute his words.

* * * * *

Lane opened his eyes and found himself in complete darkness.

His first thought was that he might be in a coffin, but unless he was in a motorized coffin that was extra short and extra wide, it was more likely that he was in the trunk of a car.

Lane thought back and tried to remember what had happened and how he got into this state.

He was out looking for a meal.

He found a helpless looking teenage boy.

He was about to bite the boy when....

Lane reached up and felt his neck, but couldn't find any wound to indicate if he'd been bitten.

As he listened to the engine of the car, he also heard the murmur of voices talking.

He couldn't make out the words that were being said, but he could definitely hear the voices.

Lane felt around in the confined darkness and could tell that the trunk area that he was in was carpeted and actually somewhat comfortable.

There wasn't much else that he could do, so he curled up and tried to fight back his anxiety about what was going to happen to him when they arrived at their destination.

* * * * *

"Do you have your brother's phone number?" Ariadne asked casually as she drove.

"Yeah. Do you need for me to call him for something?" Evan asked curiously.

"Yes. Let him know what's going on so he can prepare a place for our... guest." Ariadne said slowly.

"Wow. That sounds ominous." Evan said frankly.

"We have a darksider in the trunk who tried to attack you. I think that's enough reason to be cautious." Ariadne said simply.

"I'll call him." Evan said as he pushed the speed dial number on his phone.

"Hello?"

"Dodger?" Evan asked curiously.

"That's right. Evan, is that you?"

"Yeah. Mom and Brian and I are bringing a darksider to your place." Evan said cautiously.

"Why?"

"He sort of attacked me, but passed out before he really did anything very threatening." Evan said slowly. "Besides, I was in a public park, what was I supposed to do with the body?"

"I guess I can see that."

"And he was acting really weird before he passed out." Evan said thoughtfully.

"How so?"

"Well, first of all, he said he was sorry over and over before he even bared his fangs to me. It was like he was scared to death, but couldn't help himself." Evan said slowly. "Anyway, Mom just wanted me to call so you and Rafe could be ready when we got there."

"I'll let Rafe know what's going on. We'll be ready." Dodger said seriously, then quietly asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm fine." Evan said with a smile.

"I love you, you know that, right?"

"Yeah. I know that. And I love you, too, Dodger. Always." Evan said warmly.

"I'll see you when you get here." Dodger said gently.

* * * * *

Lane woke out of a light doze when he heard the engine stop.

A moment later, he heard the keys in the lock, then the trunk opened.

He didn't know what he had expected to see, but what he found when his eyes adjusted to the light was two teenage boys and a beautiful woman.

"Why don't you get out of there so we can go inside?" The woman asked him gently.

The words seemed to wrap themselves around his mind and he found himself climbing out of the trunk before he even knew what he was doing.

"Come along into the house." She said pleasantly, and Lane found himself wanting to do nothing but accede to her every command.

* * * * *

"Here, I dragged this out after you called." Dodger said when they stepped off the elevator into the basement.

"That looks creepy." Evan said as he looked at the large, crudely made, wooden chair.

"Rafe made it in his wood shop." Dodger chuckled, then said, "And I thought it was creepy too. In fact, it creeped me out so bad when I first saw it that I ran up to my bedroom."

"Please have a seat." Ariadne said to their guest.

He sat down in the chair, then looked at her expectantly.

"Help me get him tied down." Dodger said as he started to bind the man's hands to the arms of the chair with heavy wire.

"Couldn't you get some Velcro or something to do this?" Evan asked as he reluctantly started to bind down one of the legs.

"You have to take darksider strength into account. You need wire or chain to hold them." Dodger said frankly.

"Is he secure?" Ariadne asked as she looked the young man over.

"Yeah. I think that will hold him." Dodger said as he tested the wire with his own strength.

"I think it best if you learn to deal with situations like this on your own. But I'll be in the living room if you need me. Feel free to come to me if you need any advice." She said gently.

"Thanks for all your help Mom." Evan said sincerely.

"And for coming to get us." Brian quickly added.

"I'll always be there when you need me." Ariadne said with a loving smile, then went to the elevator.

* * * * *

Dodger turned his attention back to their guest in the chair to find him in more or less of a daze.

"Just a second." Dodger said, then rushed to the other side of the vast, mostly empty room.

He returned a moment later with a large glass of juice and a straw.

Dodger put his finger over the end of the straw, then put the other end of the straw into the young man's mouth.

As soon as his guest tasted the juice, his eyes snapped open and became alert.

"Do you want some more?" Dodger asked quietly.

"Yes! Please!" The boy asked desperately.

"What's your name?" Dodger asked slowly.

"Lane." The boy said immediately. "Lane Kingston."

"Here you go, Lane." Dodger said, then held the glass of juice forward and positioned the straw in Lane's mouth.

Lane drank the juice down within seconds.

"May I please have some more?" Lane asked hopefully.

"Let's let that settle for a minute, first." Dodger said gently.

Lane nodded, then quietly asked, "Are you guys vampires too?"

"That depends on how you look at it." Dodger said quietly.

"Yeah. Vampire doesn't mean the same thing to us that it means to regular people." Evan said seriously.

"I'm guessing that means that you are." Lane said hesitantly.

"Lane, we're shadesiders. Physically, we're the same as vampires, but we didn't lose our souls." Evan said frankly.

After a moment to consider the words, Lane hesitantly asked, "I have a soul?"

"Back in the park, why were you telling me that you were sorry?" Evan asked simply.

"Because I didn't really want to hurt you. I don't want to hurt anyone." Lane said thoughtfully. "I was just so hungry."

"Vampires don't care about who they hurt. They actually enjoy hurting people. They think it's fun." Brian said frankly.

"So I'm not a vampire?" Lane asked hopefully.

"I don't think so, but since you almost bit me, I'm not letting you loose just yet." Evan said seriously.

Lane nodded that he understood and accepted Evan's reasoning.

"You couldn't have been changed for very long. Less than a day, I'd guess." Dodger said seriously.

"Um, yeah. I guess it happened at about two this morning." Lane said quietly.

"How did it happen?" Dodger asked curiously.

Lane paused for a moment, then glanced at Evan before saying, "I'd rather not say it in front of the kids."

Evan rolled his eyes, then said, "We'll go get him some more juice so you 'grown-ups' can talk."

"Thanks Evan." Dodger said with a smile.

"Come on, Brian." Evan said, then started tromping off to the other side of the cavernous basement.

"So what happened?" Dodger asked Lane with concern.

"I met this guy and we went back to my place and... um... well..." Lane trailed off with embarrassment.

"Did he bite you or rape you?" Dodger asked calmly.

"Neither." Lane answered immediately. "We had sex, but it wasn't rape. It was incredible and wonderful. But... the condom broke."

"Condoms don't work on us." Dodger said simply.

"They don't?" Lane asked with surprise.

"Nope. The latex can't hold up to the chemical makeup of our bodily fluids, plus, with our enhanced strength and endurance... they just aren't effective at all." Dodger said casually, then added, "But since we can't get regular diseases and shadeside women rarely get pregnant, we really don't need them."

"But you're not going to, you know, hurt me... because I'm gay." Lane asked timidly.

Dodger smiled sympathetically at the question, then answered, "My husband is upstairs on a conference call. And those two young guys that you didn't want to talk in front of, they're a couple."

"Really?" Lane asked in wonder.

"I'm one of the good guys. I wouldn't lie." Dodger said with a grin.

"What does that make me?" Lane asked hesitantly.

"I think maybe you're one of the good guys, too." Dodger said honestly.

"Can we come back over there yet?" Evan called from across the room.

"What do you say, Lane?" Dodger asked with a smile.

"Yeah." Lane said shyly.

"Come on over guys. We're done." Dodger said with a chuckle.

* * * * *

"We got you some more juice." Evan said as he approached.

"Hang on for a second. I'm going to undo his hands so he can hold the glass for himself." Dodger said seriously.

"I'll behave. I promise." Lane said quickly.

"I believe you." Dodger said as he started to undo the wires. "But I'm not going to release you all the way just yet."

"Why not?" Lane asked curiously.

"Because some darksiders are smart enough to hide their true nature." Dodger said quietly, then looked at Evan with apology.

"My dad was betrayed by a darksider pretending to be a shadesider." Evan said sadly, then added, "The same guy killed my mom and tried to kill me."

"But he's dead now." Dodger added firmly. "And Evan has been adopted into a new family."

Evan smiled and said, "Yeah. Dodger's kind of my brother-in-law."

"Or I would be if the laws would ever catch up to the twenty-first century." Dodger said frankly. "On the shadeside, Rafe's my husband. But in the brightside world, we're two unrelated strangers who cohabitate."

"Don't get him started, Lane. He can go on like that for hours." Evan said with an exasperated look at Dodger.

"Yeah. Come back in about forty years and tell me how you feel about having brightsiders telling you that you and your husband don't have any relationship by their laws.

"Can you finish Lane's other hand before you get up on your soapbox?" Evan asked with a teasing grin.

"That's all I'm saying about it." Dodger said with a smile, then moved to the other side of the chair.

"Here Lane, I bet you could use this." Evan said as he handed Lane the large glass of juice.

"Thanks." Lane said quickly, then took a long slow drink.

Dodger unwrapped the wire from around Lane's left hand, then stood back to watch with satisfaction as Lane enjoyed his drink.

"So Lane, do you have anyone who you need to get in touch with and let them know that you're safe?" Dodger asked curiously.

"My dad will call me in the morning. That's about it." Lane said quietly.

"Well, I think we should be able to get you back home by then." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"You're going to let me go?" Lane asked hopefully.

"Sure. Now that we know that you're not going to be a threat to the general public, there shouldn't be any problem with that." Dodger said honestly.

"Thanks." Lane said happily.

"But there are a few things that we're going to need to discuss with you about your new... state of being." Dodger said carefully.

"Like what?" Lane asked cautiously.

"Well, you're going to have to live with certain limitations. It can be difficult, but we've got the shadeside community to help you with that." Dodger said frankly.

"Limitations, such as..." Lane said carefully.

"Not being able to go out in direct sunlight is a big one." Evan said frankly.

"Yes. It can make finding a job a real challenge." Dodger said seriously.

"I've been out of work for the past two weeks, I don't think I need for it to get any more challenging." Lane said anxiously.

"Well, once we get other things sorted out, I can make a few phone calls and maybe we'll be able to arrange something for you." Dodger said with a smile.

"Really? That'd be great." Lane said happily.

A cell phone ringing drew everyone's attention.

"It's mine." Brian said quickly, then stepped away.

"It's probably Uncle Collin." Evan whispered.

"So what other things do we need to sort out?" Lane asked cautiously.

"Well, I think the big one is finding the person who turned you and making sure that he doesn't do it to anyone else." Dodger said seriously.

"Julian is nice. Please don't throw him in your trunk and tie him up. He'll freak out." Lane said quickly.

"If you say that he's nice, then maybe we can just invite him over and have a long talk with him so he understands that condoms don't work on shadesiders." Dodger said simply.

"I wish I had a way of getting in touch with him." Lane said anxiously.

"How are we going to find him, then?" Evan asked curiously.

"The only way I know is to go to where I met him last night and hope that he's there again." Lane said thoughtfully.

"Maybe we could go do that now." Evan said quickly. "Do you think we could borrow a car?"

"Hold on, Evan. There's still a lot of stuff that Lane needs to understand." Dodger said frankly.

"Yeah. But he can learn about that stuff anytime. We need to find the guy who boinked Lane before he can boink someone else and this thing gets out of control." Evan said seriously.

"I suppose you're right." Dodger said with a nod, then grinned and asked, "Boinked?"

"I was trying to be polite, we have company." Evan said with a chuckle.

"Let's untie our company's legs so you guys can get going." Dodger said decisively.

"I told Collin that I was staying over here tonight. Is that okay?" Brian asked as he approached.

"Of course. You two have a room here whenever you want it." Dodger said with a grin, then turned his attention to Lane and said, "If you would like, you could stay too. That way we'll have time to tell you about all the things you need to know."

"And you won't have to worry about doing without juice." Brian said frankly.

"Yeah. But what is this?" Lane asked as he held up his glass.

"A synthetic blood substitute." Dodger said simply.

"It's great!" Lane said appreciatively.

"You wouldn't have thought so if you'd tried some before you changed." Dodger said with a chuckle.

"Before you take another trip down memory lane, do you think we can untie Lane from this chair?" Evan asked hopefully.

"You're no fun." Dodger said with a slight pout.

"Dodger is over fifty years old. He doesn't look it, but sometimes he acts it." Evan said to Lane conspiratorially.

Lane considered for a moment, then said, "It's good to have someone around with experience to give us sound advice."

"Thank you, Lane." Dodger said happily. "And let me revise my earlier invitation to say that you're invited as often and for as long as you would like to stay."

"I'll remember that." Lane chuckled.

"We'd better get going before it's too late." Evan said seriously.

"Right. Do you want to take the BMW or the Mercedes?" Dodger asked Evan as he led the way to the elevator.

"BMW." Brian said seriously.

"He's the driver." Evan said with a shrug.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Lane?" Evan asked as he looked into the back seat.

"I'm sorry I tried to hurt you." Lane said quietly.

"You were hungry, right?" Evan asked seriously.

"Yeah. Hungrier than I've ever been."

"I understand. I might have done the same thing if I wasn't lucky enough to have been helped by Rafe and Dodger." Evan said frankly.

"How did you get changed? I mean, if it isn't too personal." Lane asked curiously.

"Me and my mom were attacked by a vampire. She was killed, I was almost killed, but since I survived, I was turned." Evan said quietly.

"Oh my god! I'm so sorry." Lane said in horror.

"It's okay." Evan said with a forced smile. "That was the end of my old life and the beginning of a new one. And my new life is pretty good."

"He got a new mom and dad and even a brother." Brian said from the driver's seat.

"Don't forget my wonderful, gorgeous husband." Evan said with a smile.

"Well, I thought that went without saying." Brian said with a grin.

"Was that lady with the long black hair your new mother?" Lane asked cautiously.

"Yes. Her name is Ariadne." Evan said happily.

"And she's amazing." Brian interjected.

"I'll say. I've never felt anything like it. Her presence... it's like she can just look at me and I'll do anything she says." Lane said in wonder.

"Yeah. That's something called 'the thrall'. All of us have it, but she can use it better than anyone else that I've met." Evan said frankly.

"I think it has something to do with her being an ancient. Your dad has it too, he just doesn't use it as much as your mom." Brian said thoughtfully.

"An ancient?" Lane asked cautiously.

"Yeah. It's just like it sounds. They're really, really old." Evan said with a smile.

"How old?" Lane asked uncertainly.

"I don't know. Mom says that they weren't using the modern calendar back then. Honestly, even she may not know."

"Wow." Lane said in wonder.

"Whether you find your friend or not, you should really come home with us tonight." Evan said seriously.

"Why?" Lane asked cautiously.

"Because there's going to be a lot of stuff for you to learn. It's better for you to be around people who understand than to try to pass among brightsiders while you're trying to figure things out." Evan said as he looked Lane in the eyes.

"Well, I'll miss my dad's phone call. But besides that, there's no reason I need to be at home." Lane said thoughtfully.

"Can you call your dad now?" Evan asked simply.

"Sure." Lane said with surprise.

"Here. Let him know that you won't be at home in the morning. You can call him back some other time and give him Rafe's number. I would tell it to you, but all I know is that it's '2' on my speed dial." Evan said with a grin.

* * * * *

"Hi, can I speak to Dad?" Lane asked into the phone.

"Um, yes Mom, I know I'm a sodomite and that I'm going to burn in hell. But do you think, before I do that, I could talk to dad?" Lane asked hopefully.

Evan and Brian exchanged a concerned look at the words.

"Hi Dad. I just wanted to call and let you know that I won't be home in the morning, so you won't need to call." Lane said carefully.

"No. Nothing's wrong. In fact, I made some new friends, and if everything works out, they may be able to help me find a job." Lane said happily.

"That's okay. I can still hear you, but ask her if she talks to her savior with that mouth." Lane said with a grin.

"I love you too. I'll talk to you soon." Lane said happily.

"I will." Lane said with a chuckle, then hung up the phone.

* * * * *

"Is everything alright?" Evan asked with concern.

"Yeah. My mom just hates gays... and Democrats... and environmentalists... and abortion doctors... and anyone else her preacher tells her to." Lane said in a weary voice.

"And now she hates you, just because you're gay?" Evan asked quietly.

"Oh yeah. The funny thing is that, I'm the one who told her. I foolishly believed that crap about a mother's unconditional love." Lane said bitterly.

"I know what you mean." Brian said with a weary chuckle. "My parents kicked me out on my ass when I came out to them."

"They kicked you out?" Lane asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Then to make a bad day even worse, that's the day I got bitten by a darksider and nearly died." Brian said bitterly.

"What did you do?" Lane asked timidly.

"There wasn't much I *could* do. Collin and his guys were chasing the darksider." Brian said distantly. "Once they got him, Collin took me home and helped me through the change."

"So what about your parents?" Lane asked quietly.

"I haven't talked to them since." Brian said darkly. "I know that when they threw me out that they didn't intend for me to get bitten. But... in my heart, I blame them. It's because of them that the person that I was, their son, died that night."

"Do you miss them?" Lane asked with concern.

"No. My life is great now, especially since I've met Evan. That chapter is closed." Brian said with finality.

"My parents are both dead, so I'm dealing with it in pretty much the same way." Evan said frankly.

"I never realized how lucky I am. I mean, yeah, my mom's a screaming bitch. But I've still got my dad and I know that, no matter what, he loves me." Lane said with a watery smile.

"Well, I've got my new mom and dad and a brother and even an Uncle Collin. So I'm pretty happy with the way that things are." Evan said peacefully.

"So am I." Brian said thoughtfully. "I mean, after all I went through, I don't think I could accept someone trying to be my parent. But Ariadne and Michael have accepted me and care for me because I'm Evan's husband. So it's almost like having parents again, but without any of the insecurities that I have leftover from my old parents."

"Make a right up here. We're almost there." Lane said as he realized that they were just about to arrive at downtown.

Chapter 19

"Was he in there?" Evan asked as Lane walked out of the diner.

"No. I looked through the whole place." Lane said anxiously.

"Do you want to try the mall?" Brian asked thoughtfully.

"Sounds good, but would you mind if we stopped at my apartment first? If I'm going to be spending the night at your house, I'll need to get a few things and we're in the neighborhood." Lane asked hopefully.

"Sure, just tell me where we're going." Brian said without concern.

"It's only about fifteen blocks from here." Lane said as he stopped at the back of the BMW and waited for Brian to unlock the doors.

Brian nodded, then flashed a loving smile at Evan before getting into the car.

* * * * *

"People live here?" Evan asked cautiously as they walked into the drab and neglected building.

"Yeah. If you want to call it living." Lane said with a smirk, then added more seriously, "I'm on the fourth floor."

"No elevator?" Brian asked as he looked around.

A snort of a laugh was Lane's only response as he led them to the stairs.

* * * * *

"This will just take me a minute." Lane said as they crested the fourth floor landing.

"Lane?" A voice called from down the hallway.

After a long puzzled moment, Lane hesitantly asked, "Julian?"

Evan and Brian watched as the younger teenager ran to Lane and pulled him into a fierce hug.

"After I left this morning, I realized how I must have sounded. I'm really sorry for leaving like that." Julian said in a rush, then asked, "Are you mad at me?"

Relief filled Lane's expression as he held Julian tightly in his arms and whispered, "No. I'm not mad at all. I'm just glad you're here."

"So it wasn't just my imagination, that was more than a..." Julian trailed off self consciously.

"Yeah. For me, too." Lane whispered.

"I'm guessing that this is who we were looking for." Evan said slowly, reluctant to interrupt their private moment.

Julian looked up at the sound of Evan's voice and it was obvious that he hadn't noticed Evan or Brian in the hallway with them.

"Guys, this is Julian." Lane said with a joyful grin, "Julian, this is Evan and Brian."

"Lane, what..." Julian began to ask, then panic filled his eyes. "You need to stay away from them. They're not normal."

"What do you mean?" Lane asked cautiously.

Julian forced Lane out of his arms and behind him, using himself to shield Lane.

"There's some stuff you don't know, and I'll tell you all about it later. But you need to leave now, it isn't safe for you here." Julian said firmly.

"Julian, these guys are okay. I promise." Lane said gently.

"Please Lane, just trust me... they can hurt you." Julian said desperately.

"You mean *change* me?" Lane asked slowly.

The words caught Julian off guard, and he turned to look at Lane with surprise.

"I think it's a little bit too late to worry about that." Lane said apologetically, then hesitantly opened his mouth and bared his fangs.

"Shit!" Julian gasped, then he threw his arms around Lane and asked, "Did they hurt you? Are you alright?"

Evan and Brian exchanged a glance and with that one look, reached a silent agreement that they would let Lane do the explaining.

"I'm fine." Lane said soothingly as he hugged Julian tightly. "In fact, now that you're here, I'm great."

"But... how? What did they..." Julian asked in a whisper as he pulled back enough to look Lane in the eyes.

"Evan and Brian didn't do anything to me." Lane said seriously, then watched Julian's expression carefully to be sure that the message had been received.

"Then how..." Julian began to ask again, but seemed to run out of steam.

"I guess in the heat of the moment last night, you didn't notice that the condoms broke... all of them." Lane said quietly.

"They did?" Julian asked with wide eyes, then seemed to pale. "Oh my God! You mean *I* did this to you?"

Lane nodded, then pulled Julian close to his chest.

When the silence seemed to have stretched on too long, Brian hesitantly said, "Maybe we should go into your apartment. This is kind of a public place to be talking about these things."

"My apartment is right over there." Lane said as he indicated his apartment with a tilt of his head, then asked, "Would you mind?"

Brian looked at Lane curiously, then realized what Lane meant when he held out his keys.

"Do you hate me?" Julian asked in a whisper.

"No." Lane said immediately, then added more gently, "Not at all. Not even for a second."

Evan smiled at the exchange, then followed Brian into Lane's apartment.

* * * * *

As soon as all four of them were inside, Evan decided that certain things needed to be said.

"Julian, I don't know you or anything about your situation, but considering what happened to Lane, we think it might be a good idea to fill you in on a few of the do's and don'ts to keep it from happening again."

"Huh?" Julian said as he finally lifted his head from Lane's shoulder.

"Condoms don't work on shadesiders." Brian said frankly.

"They don't?" Julian asked with confusion.

"Not at all." Brian said firmly.

"Oh." Julian said weakly, then hesitantly looked up into Lane's eyes and whispered, "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"It's okay." Lane said quietly, then leaned down to give Julian a gentle kiss.

"I'm guessing you must not have been changed for very long if you didn't know that already." Evan said curiously.

"I... um, no. About a week." Julian said uncomfortably.

Both Brian and Evan immediately noticed Julian's discomfort.

"Listen." Brian said seriously. "There are some things that both of you really need to know. Evan and I haven't been changed for very long either, but Evan's brother-in-law has been changed for about forty years and has invited both of you to come to his house tonight so he can explain things."

"We just came from there. It's a really nice place." Lane said gently.

"You want to go?" Julian asked cautiously. "I mean, are you sure?"

"I want for us to go." Lane said soothingly, "I'm completely in the dark about what's going on and I really think that these guys will help us be able to figure things out."

After a long, contemplative moment, Julian reluctantly nodded.

"They want us to spend the night, so I need to grab a few things." Lane said, then leaned down to kiss Julian briefly, before hurrying into the bedroom.

"Do you need for us to take you anywhere so you can get some things for the night?" Brian asked cautiously.

"No. I'm good." Julian said too quickly.

Evan studied Julian's expression carefully, trying to get some sense of why he was acting so antsy.

"Julian, we just want to help you if we can. We don't want anything from you." Evan said quietly.

"Except maybe a promise not to change anyone else like you did last night." Brian interjected.

"That was an accident." Julian said defensively, then whispered, "I tried to do the right thing... I didn't know."

"I believe you." Evan said sincerely. "But if you'll listen to what my brother-in-law has to say, then you *will* know, and there won't be another accident."

Julian reluctantly nodded.

"I think that's everything." Lane said as he walked out of his bedroom.

"Then I guess we're ready." Evan said with a smile.

* * * * *

"Are you okay?" Lane asked Julian who was snuggled against his side, half under his arm.

A nod into Lane's shoulder was Julian's only response.

"You know I'm not mad, right?" Lane asked carefully.

Julian nodded again, then whispered, "But you should be."

Lane bent down and kissed Julian on the top of the head before saying, "I'm not very good at doing what I should."

"I guess we've got that in common." Julian said quietly.

"Do you want to tell me about it?" Lane asked gently.

Julian shook his head, still buried in Lane's shoulder.

"Okay." Lane said as he absently brought up a hand to stroke Julian's mousy brown hair. "You don't have to tell me anything."

Julian seemed to melt into Lane's side as he relaxed.

Evan was doing his best to look like he wasn't watching and listening to everything that was happening in the back seat.

* * * * *

"Oh my God! What kind of place is this?" Julian asked as he got out of the car.

"This is my brother's house." Evan said proudly.

"I've never seen a place like this for real." Julian said in wonder.

"I don't think any of us have." Evan said with a grin. "Before coming here, I was living in a dumpy little two bedroom apartment with my mom."

"How dumpy?" Lane asked with a grin.

Evan chuckled and said, "You win, Lane. Your apartment building is a lot worse than ours was."

Lane nodded with accomplishment, as if he'd just won a prize.

"Come on. I know Dodger is going to be waiting for us." Evan said cheerfully.

"Should I put the car in the garage?" Brian asked hesitantly.

"I don't think so. There's no telling how long this is going to take, so you might as well leave it out in case we need it again." Evan said seriously.

* * * * *

"We're home!" Evan crowed as he walked in the front door.

"I'm in the kitchen." Dodger called in response.

"The living room is over here." Evan said as he gestured with his arm.

He needn't have made the effort. Both Lane and Julian were standing staring at the vast, open room.

"Nice place, huh?" Evan said with a grin.

"Your brother really lives here?" Julian asked in awe as he craned his neck to look at the chandelier.

"Yup. Knowing him, he's probably still on the phone in the study. But I'm sure you'll get to meet him sooner or later." Evan said happily.

"I wasn't expecting you back so early. How did things go?" Dodger asked as he walked out of the kitchen, drying his hands on a dishtowel.

"Great. Dodger, I'd like for you to meet..."

"Duran?" Dodger asked in a gasp.

A look of panic filled Julian's eyes at the sound of the name.

Before he could respond, run or even blink an eye, Dodger was across the room, hugging Julian for all he was worth.

"Oh god, Duran! Your father has been worried sick about you. How are you?" Dodger asked, on the verge of tears.

"You... know my dad?" Julian asked hesitantly.

Dodger let out an abrupt bark of laughter at the question, then said, "Know him? Duran, I'm your Uncle Dodger. I'm your dad's youngest brother."

Julian pulled back and stared at Dodger for a moment, then said, "But you're... like me."

Dodger snickered, then said, "Yeah. It looks that way."

"And Dad... you know... knows about it?" Julian asked hesitantly.

"Yep. For about forty years." Dodger said frankly.

Julian blinked with surprise.

"Don't you know what your dad does for a living?" Dodger asked with a grin.

"He's a delivery driver." Julian said cautiously.

Dodger snorted, then said, "Whenever just about any shadesider in Columbus needs something done during the day, your father is the person they call."

"What's his name?" Brian asked curiously.

"Duncan Tribodeaux." Julian responded automatically, seemingly in a daze.

"I've met him a couple times." Brian said with surprise. "He was nice."

"Um, yeah." Julian said distantly.

"Come on into the living room and sit down." Dodger said, just noticing Julian's stupefied condition.

* * * * *

"Where's mom?" Evan asked as he looked around.

"She drove into town to get your dad when he and Morgan are finished with their meeting." Dodger said simply.

Evan nodded that he had heard.

"Would you guys like some juice?" Dodger asked as everyone seated themselves.

"Yeah." Lane said immediately.

"Why don't you let me get that. I think your nephew needs you." Evan said frankly.

Dodger looked at Julian with concern, then slowly nodded.

"I'll help." Brian said as he stood from his chair.

"Duran. Do you want to talk about it?" Dodger asked as he sat down beside his nephew, the other side from Lane.

"Not really." Julian said reluctantly, "But I probably should."

"Duran." Dodger said firmly, finally drawing his full attention. "You don't have to tell me anything. Okay? I'm here if you want to talk about it, but only when you're ready."

"Okay." Julian said reluctantly.

"Do you want me to call you Duran or Julian?" Lane asked gently.

After a moment to consider, he finally said, "Duran, I think. I just didn't want to use my real name after I ran away from home."

The sound of movement drew everyone's attention as Rafe walked into the room.

"Are you finished with your conference call?" Dodger asked happily as he ran to Rafe and gave him a big kiss.

"Just taking a break. I thought I would get some juice and try to get the feeling back in my ear." Rafe said with a chuckle.

"You should use the speakerphone." Dodger said frankly.

"No. It's a lot better when I can take the handset away from my ear when Morgan and my dad start getting excited."

Dodger chuckled at the response, then said, "Rafe, I'd like for you to meet Lane, our captive from earlier, and my nephew Duran."

"It's a pleasure to meet both of you." Rafe said formally, then added in a more casual voice, "And as much as I would like to hear the story behind that introduction, I've got two very pigheaded men waiting for me on the phone."

"I'll fill you in later." Dodger said as he gave Rafe a firm hug.

"Hey Rafe, are you done with your call?" Evan asked as he walked into the living room, carrying a tray of drinks.

"Just taking a short break." Rafe said with a smile at Evan. "Do you mind if I take one of those?"

"Hey, it's your house. You can take whatever you want." Evan said with a chuckle.

"Smart ass." Rafe said as he picked up a drink from the tray, then ruffled Evan's hair before going back to the study.

"Who was that?" Duran asked curiously.

"My husband, Rafe." Dodger said happily.

"Husband." Duran said in confirmation.

"Yep. For just about forty years now." Dodger said with a smile.

"And my dad knows about that?" Duran asked cautiously.

"Sure. We told him all about that the day that he and Rafe met. We wanted to be sure that he was going to be okay with everything before we invited him to live with us." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"My dad lived with you and Rafe?" Duran asked with surprise.

"Yeah. Right here in this house. He lived with us for about a year, until he found a good job and could support himself." Dodger said frankly.

Duran shook his head in wonder at all the things he didn't know about his father.

"Is that why you ran away? Because you're gay?" Lane asked quietly.

Duran turned and looked at Lane with surprise.

"Or was it the vampire... I mean, shadesider thing?" Lane asked curiously.

"I, um... my dad never really said anything bad about gay people, but he never really said anything good either." Duran said quietly. "I remember overhearing one time that I had a gay uncle who lived here in Columbus."

Duran looked over at Dodger and said, "I guess that was you."

Dodger nodded slowly.

"I just figured that if I've got a gay uncle who lives here in town, and we never talk to him or visit him or invite him over, then my dad must not like gay people." Duran said with an apologetic look at Dodger.

"It was a difficult decision, but your father and I decided that I wouldn't have any contact with your family because it was just too dangerous." Dodger said regretfully.

"Dangerous? How?" Duran asked in confusion.

"How long do you think it would take for you or your mom to notice that I don't age?" Dodger asked frankly.

After a moment to consider, Duran hesitantly nodded that he understood.

"Your father comes out here once or twice a month, just to visit. For the last forty years, he's been my only blood family." Dodger said honestly.

"Yeah. He's told me about how things were back on the farm before he left, and that none of his brothers or sisters will talk to him now." Duran said quietly.

"They think we betrayed our father by leaving." Dodger said with a nod.

"Yeah. That's pretty much what he said." Duran said grimly.

"Would you mind if I call your dad to let him know that you're alright?" Dodger asked hopefully, then quietly added, "He's worrying himself sick."

"If you want to call him, it's okay. But I can't talk to him yet... I don't know what to say." Duran said in anguish.

"I'll just call to let him know that you're safe." Dodger said sincerely.

Duran nodded, then watched as Dodger hurried away.

"So, how old are you?" Lane asked curiously.

"Sixteen." Duran reluctantly admitted.

"I thought so." Lane said frankly.

"Does that bother you?" Duran asked hesitantly.

"I'm not sure yet." Lane said slowly, then broke into a grin and said, "Ask me again in a hundred years."

Duran puzzled over the response for a moment, then broke into a smile.

"So, how did you get changed?" Evan asked curiously.

"I don't know." Duran said shyly.

"Um, how can you not know?" Brian asked cautiously.

"I was hanging out with some guys and some of them were talking about a party at an abandoned house, so I decided to go along. All I can figure is that someone must have put something in my drink. I woke up the next afternoon laying naked in the basement... " Duran finished with a shrug.

"How did you handle it? I mean, what did you do?" Evan asked in wonder.

"Oh, I just basically freaked out." Duran said with a chuckle. "As soon as I found my clothes, I started looking for the people I remembered from the party to try and find out what had been done to me. I really didn't have a clue about what was really going on at that point. I just thought I was drugged up or something. Luckily, I finally ended up talking to this guy named Juss. If I hadn't found him, I might have starved to death before I figured it out."

"I know Juss." Brian said with surprise.

"He explained the basics to me. You know bright, shade, dark, yada, yada, yada. Then he said that if I needed a safe place to stay during the day, I could crash at his place. So I've sort of halfway been living with him for a week now." Duran said, and finished with a shrug.

"He should have told you about the condoms." Brian said frankly.

"Yeah." Duran said, then flashed a look of regret at Lane. "The subject never came up."

"I think I'm glad it happened." Lane said quietly.

"You are?" Duran asked with surprise.

"Yes." Lane said honestly. "Otherwise, I might never have gotten to know the real you."

Duran considered for a moment, then said, "I can accept that."

* * * * *

Dodger walked into the room looking distinctly uncomfortable.

"Is something wrong?" Evan asked immediately.

"Duncan is on his way over." Dodger said with an apologetic look at Duran.

"You said he knows about you being a shadesider and about you and Rafe, right?" Duran said slowly.

"Right." Dodger confirmed.

"Then this might go okay." Duran said slowly, not sounding at all certain of it.

"Do you want us to be there with you or would you rather we leave you alone with your father?" Dodger asked carefully.

Duran looked around the room, then quietly said, "I think I can use all the help that I can get."

"You'll have it." Dodger said firmly.

The others all nodded their agreement.

* * * * *

"Is anyone hungry?" Dodger asked into the tense, quiet room.

Lane looked up at Dodger with confusion, then timidly asked, "What do we eat?"

"Food." Dodger said simply, then realized the true nature of Lane's question. "When you changed, your senses became more acute, so certain foods will be less appealing than they were. But for the most part, we eat normal food."

"Oh. I thought we just drank blood." Lane said timidly.

Duran cuddled Lane close, then said, "I don't know any more about this than you do."

"If you don't mind me in your kitchen, I'll go and make us something to snack on." Brian said quickly.

"I'll help him." Evan said immediately, then looked to Dodger and said, "While we're doing that, you can fill Lane and Duran in on some of the basics."

Brian flashed him a quick, loving glance, then nodded.

Evan got up with a smile on his face as he hurried to follow.

Chapter 20

"I suppose we should take care of first things first." Dodger said as he looked at the two young men holding each other for support.

"Just do what you need to do, Dodger. I know we just met, but for some reason, I trust you." Lane said bravely.

Dodger smiled at the words and said, "First of all, I suppose that I should confirm your bloodlines... at least, I think that that's what Rafe would do."

Lane and Duran looked at each other apprehensively.

Dodger noticed and chuckled at the reaction before saying, "It's nothing to worry about. It's just something we do with the new guys."

Dodger's words didn't seem to put them at ease.

"Lane, you were turned by Duran, right?" Dodger asked simply.

Lane reluctantly looked into Dodger's eyes and slowly nodded.

"Good. Then your part's done." Dodger said happily.

Both boys looked at Dodger with surprise.

"We know who made you, we know that they're not going to do it to anyone else. So, there's no problem." Dodger explained.

Lane seemed to wilt with relief at the announcement.

"Who made you, Duran?" Dodger asked pleasantly.

"I don't know." Duran said as he looked his newly discovered uncle in the eyes.

Undeterred, Dodger said, "Tell me about it."

"I went to this party. I guess someone slipped me something in my drink. I woke up the next day naked and with a very sore butt." Duran said frankly.

"Oh, that's not good." Dodger said distantly.

"What's wrong?" Lane asked as he looked from Duran to Dodger nervously.

"If we can't figure out who turned Duran... I'm getting ahead of myself. Duran, have you told anyone else what you just told me?" Dodger asked seriously.

"You mean besides Lane and the guys in the kitchen?" Duran asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Besides them." Dodger said seriously.

"When Juss found me, he asked me a bajillion questions about who I remembered being at the party and stuff. I think he might have called someone else and told them about it, but I'm not sure. I was pretty out of it right then."

"I can imagine." Dodger said sympathetically, then continued, "Do you know of any way to get in touch with this 'Juss' person? I really need to find out if anyone is looking into this before I talk to Rafe or Morgan about it."

"This is really a big deal, isn't it?" Lane asked quietly.

"Yes. If there's someone out there turning people indiscriminately, the entire community will work together to stop them, no matter what it takes." Dodger said honestly.

"If I can borrow your phone, I can call Juss on his cell." Duran said reluctantly.

"Please do that. Hopefully he'll have the answers I need and this will be the end of it." Dodger said as he picked up the cordless phone from the end table and handed it to Duran.

"And if it isn't?" Lane asked cautiously.

"Best case, we'll find the person, talk to them and they'll promise not to do it again." Dodger said with a half-hearted smile.

"And worst case?" Lane asked cautiously.

"A blood hunt. Word will be spread through the entire Shadeside and Darkside community that one of us has turned rogue and needs to be taken out of action." Dodger said regretfully.

"The Darksiders, too? You have contact with them?" Duran asked with surprise.

"Officially, no. But realistically, we know who to leave a message with so that they will get it." Dodger hedged.

"Juss? It's Julian. I'm at this guy's house and he wanted to know if you ever figured out who drugged me that night?" Duran asked carefully.

Julian's eyes went wide as he silently mouthed the word 'really?'.

Finally, he blinked a few times and said, "Hang on, I'll tell him what you said. He may have some other questions."

Dodger and Lane waited anxiously for Duran to tell them what was going on.

"Um, so it turns out that, um, I guess the whole thing was a setup." Duran said with a disturbed look.

"How do you mean?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"In school, I had this sort-of friend named David. We weren't close or anything, but we'd hang out sometimes. Anyway, David had this creepy older brother named Owen, a total rhoid-monster. Owen's the main reason I never wanted to go over to David's house, the guy creeped me out." Duran said queasily.

"So Owen's the one who turned you?" Dodger asked carefully.

"Yeah. He heard that I'd run away from home and set things up so that I'd get invited to his little party at the abandoned house. Everything that happened was just what he'd planned. I guess he figured that when I turned, I'd... want him, or something. Whatever. He wanted me, and he got me." Duran said with a look of disgust.

"What happened to Owen?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"I guess he'd turned two other people before me... pretty much the same way. Juss doesn't know for sure if Owen was a Darksider or just a dick. Either way, when Collin's people found him, they, um... took care of it. Let's just say that Owen won't be turning anyone else." Duran said reluctantly.

"Good." Lane said with relief as he cuddled close to Duran's side.

Dodger nodded, then looked at the phone in Duran's hand as he said, "Please thank Juss for the information. That was everything that I needed to know."

Duran nodded, then quickly said his goodbyes to his friend on the phone.

"Is that *all* you needed to know?" Lane asked cautiously.

"That was the first thing. Now that we know that no one is out there turning people indiscriminately, we can concern ourselves with more cheerful things." Dodger said with a smile.

"Anyone hungry?" Evan asked as he carried a tray of plates into the living room.

"We can go into the dining room or the kitchen." Dodger hurried to say.

"We're having appetizers for dinner. Perfect living room food." Evan said as he started handing out plates.

"Oh wow! Fresh, hot quesadillas!" Dodger said with excitement when he received his plate.

"Brian made them. Try them with the green stuff, it's really pretty good." Evan said as he handed plates to Duran and Lane.

"Do you mean the 'guacamole'?" Dodger asked with a grin.

"I guess so. I'm completely helpless in the kitchen." Evan said shyly before leaving the room.

"This is really good." Lane said with surprise.

"Please, eat your fill. You look like you could use a good meal or two." Dodger said honestly.

"I've always been a bean pole." Lane said with a shrug.

"Don't be surprised if you start putting on a little bit of weight before very long." Dodger said with a smile.

"Why's that?" Lane asked curiously.

"Since the change, your body operates more efficiently. Because of that, your muscles will tone more easily and maintain their strength without any extra work by you. In essence, your body will find it's optimum weight and maintain it without you having to do anything." Dodger said as he waited for Lane's reaction.

"So you mean that I won't be skinny and weak anymore?" Lane asked with surprise.

"Nope. If you're a naturally thin person, you probably won't grow massive muscles or anything like that, but you definitely won't be skinny." Dodger grinned.

"What will happen to me?" Duran asked cautiously.

"You seem to be of average weight, so I doubt that anything noticeable will happen." Dodger said frankly.

"Good. Because you're already perfect." Lane whispered to Duran, but Dodger could clearly hear.

"We'll be right in to join you for dinner." Evan said as he carried a plate toward Rafe's study.

"If you don't hurry, we'll be done before you get in here." Dodger called back to him.

"Brian's making more for you. He figured that was going to happen." Evan chuckled before disappearing into the office.

* * * * *

"Great food, Brian." Dodger said appreciatively. All the times Evan and Brian had stayed with them, Dodger had always done all the cooking.

"I'm glad you like it. I don't know much real cooking, but I'm a master of appetizers." Brian said frankly.

"That's better than me. I'd probably burn the house down trying to make peanut butter and jelly." Evan said honestly.

"I'll keep that in mind." Dodger chuckled before taking another bite.

* * * * *

"So, do you need to know anything else from us?" Duran asked between bites of food.

"That was the big thing. The rest is getting to know you and filling you in on the dos and don'ts on the Shadeside." Dodger said honestly.

"Like don't go out in the sunlight?" Lane asked curiously before grabbing a few more quesadillas from the platter on the coffee table.

"Your own instincts will probably do well enough at keeping you out of the sunlight. Your job is to not let brightsiders notice that you can't go out in the daytime." Dodger said honestly.

"So, how do you do that?" Evan asked curiously.

"Don't you already know?" Duran asked cautiously.

"No. Brian and I haven't been changed that much longer than you two. We've been living between here and Collin's house for a few weeks, but no one's sat us down and had 'the talk' with us yet." Evan finished with a smile.

"The answer to Evan's question varies on a case by case basis. You do your best. We can offer suggestions, but you have to make the decisions that are the best fit for you." Dodger said frankly.

"A couple weeks ago, before I got fired, I had a late night job at a video rental place. Would something like that be a good idea?" Lane asked curiously.

"An overnight job can be an excellent idea, however, I wouldn't pin my hopes on a video rental place. It's hard to believe that there are any still open for business." Dodger said honestly.

"If it weren't for the adult video room, the place would have closed years ago. All it is now is a place for old guys to get their whack-off material without visiting a real porn store." Lane said with a shrug.

"That reminds me, is it really true that no one's going to be bothered that we're gay?" Duran asked curiously.

"Nope. Shadesiders don't care who you sleep with or what you do as long as you aren't endangering the community." Dodger said simply.

"That seems simple enough." Lane said with a nod.

"Usually, it is. But there are times when protecting the Shadeside community can be kind of inconvenient. You end up having to do things that you'd really rather not, for the good of everyone else. I guess that's part of why Collin and his guys keep separate from us." Dodger said frankly.

"How is what they do different from what you do?" Brian asked curiously.

"Collin and his guys focus a lot more in personal and individual responsibility. From what I've seen, they pretty much believe the same things that we do, but we're willing to give up a little bit of our personal control over things to allow the community to help us all." Dodger said introspectively.

"Wait. So, it's something like, you and Rafe are communists and Collin and his guys are capitalists?" Brian asked carefully.

Dodger chuckled, then said, "No. I'd say we're more socialist and they're more libertarian. But what it comes down to is that when we face a problem, we prefer to tackle them collectively and Collin's bunch would rather tackle things individually. They'll only come together as a last resort."

"Do you think they're wrong?" Brian asked cautiously.

"No. They made a choice. From my point of view, it's a selfish choice. But it's their right to live the way that they choose." Dodger said frankly.

A knocking on the door caused everyone to look up in unison.

"That's probably your dad." Dodger said as he stood.

"Do you think he'll be disappointed in me?" Duran asked nervously.

"He'll be relieved to see that you're alright. I promise." Dodger said as he hurried to the door.

* * * * *

"Is he here? Can I see him? How is he?" Duncan asked frantically as soon as the door was opened.

"Hold on, Dunc. Come in. He's fine." Dodger assured his brother as he ushered him inside.

As Duncan walked further into the room, his questing eyes finally found their target and locked in on Duran, just as he stood from the couch.

"Duran! Thank God you're alright!" Duncan called as he raced across the room.

Before anyone knew what had happened, Duncan was holding his son, hugging the stuffing out of him.

"I'm fine Dad. I'm really alright." Duncan said in a muffled voice into his father's chest.

"What happened to you? Are you alright?" Duncan asked as his tears freely fell.

"He got turned." Dodger said frankly as he slowly approached his brother and his nephew.

Duncan froze in place for a moment, then released his grip on Duncan enough to look down into his eyes.

"It's okay. I still love you." Duncan whispered as he held his son's gaze.

Duran smiled with relief before burying his face back into his father's chest and returning the hug.

"Why don't you guys have a seat so Duran can explain?" Dodger asked as he gestured toward the couch.

Duncan guided his son to sit with him on one end of the couch.

Dodger noticed that Lane seemed uncertain about what he should do. With a gesture, Dodger indicated that Lane should take the remaining seat on the couch, so he could be beside Duran.

* * * * *

After long minutes of hugging, Duncan finally asked, "So how did this happen?"

"It's really stupid. I got lured into going to a party and when I got there, someone slipped me something in my drink. The next thing I know, it's the next day, I'm naked in the basement, and my butt's really sore." Duran said frankly.

"Of all the ways that it could have happened, that's not the worst." Dodger interjected half-heartedly.

"I'm so sorry, Duran. If I had a way to go back and undo what happened, I swear that I would." Duncan said as he held his son.

"It's really okay, Dad. I'm not, like, freaked out about it or anything. And since then, things have only been getting better for me." Lane said in a reassuring tone.

Duncan pulled back to look at his son curiously.

"Dad, this is my boyfriend, Lane." Duran said, then turned to Lane and asked, "That's okay isn't it? Do you want to be my boyfriend?"

"Um, sure." Lane said with astonishment.

"He's not the one who did this to you, is he?" Duncan asked as he looked at Lane cautiously.

"No! Lane would never ever hurt anyone. In fact, I'm the one who turned him... it was kind of an accident." Duran stammered at the end.

"I don't blame you." Lane whispered assuringly.

"I know that I never told you that I was gay, but... well, Dodger said that you've known about him for years and years and never had a problem..." Duran rambled.

"It's okay." Duncan whispered to his son, then added, "Your mother and I have suspected it for years. We did our best not to make you feel pressured to feel like you had to be something that you weren't. That's why we never asked about girlfriends or anything like that, we just wanted you to be happy."

"I overheard you talking about your gay brother one time, and... well, I got the idea that since he was gay and you didn't ever invite him over or visit him..." Duran trailed off with a shrug.

"I'm sorry about that. Since you know about the Shadesider thing, you know that it's a little more complicated than that. We did what we thought was best, but I suppose, looking back on it now, that we were cowards. We should have sat you down and told you point blank how we felt about things and that we would love you no matter what." Duncan said honestly.

Duran looked down as he slowly nodded.

"The whole family is worried about you and they miss you." Duncan said frankly.

"But... now that I'm... like this..." Duran choked out past the lump in his throat.

"You can go see them." Dodger said simply.

Duran looked at him suddenly, seemingly just realizing that he and his father weren't the only two people in the room.

"You just changed. You can go and visit with your family and spend time with them and let them know that you're just fine." Dodger said with a gentle smile.

"But... then I'll have to leave... and stay away." Duran said as his tears fell.

"Yes. But you can still have contact. Just, over time, you'll have to make it more and more indirect. I'm not saying that it's going to be easy, but other people have made it work." Dodger said frankly.

"And with your dad knowing about what's really going on, you won't have to hide stuff from him at all." Lane interjected.

Dodger nodded his agreement.

"If you're up to it, I'd really like to take you home tonight. The whole family is there and worried sick about you. It'd make everyone feel alot better." Duncan said gently.

Duran looked at Lane and seemed to be torn by his decision.

"Lane can come, too. I'm sure that everyone will be overjoyed to meet your new boyfriend." Duncan said with a smile.

Duran seemed to be about to agree, when he quickly said, "Dodger wanted to tell us some important stuff about how to be Shadesiders."

"You'll be with your dad. He'll help you keep your secret safe." Dodger assured him.

Before Duran could agree, the sound of movement caused everyone to look up.

"I thought that call was never going to end." Rafe said as he walked into the living room, rubbing his ear.

"Good evening, Rafe. How've you been?" Duncan asked pleasantly.

Rafe leaned in to shake Duncan's hand, then said, "I'll have to get back to you on that. I'm not quite sure how I feel about the things that were decided tonight."

"Sounds serious." Dodger said with concern.

Rafe slowly looked around the room before saying, "Morgan and my father have noticed an upturn in the number of new Shadesiders and Darksiders in the past few months."

Dodger seemed to be about to argue, then looked at the four boys who had been turned in as many weeks.

"It's an instinctive thing for us to increase our numbers when the Brightside population seems to be growing faster than we are." Rafe continued.

"Is it?" Dodger asked curiously.

"It's too soon to be sure if it's a ripple or a wave. But, at the moment, there is an increase in births. Unfortunately, if we react to it by increasing our numbers and their population doesn't significantly increase... that creates another set of problems." Rafe said frankly.

"Okay. So there are too many people being turned, there's not really anything we can do about it, is there?" Dodger asked slowly.

"Actually, there is." Rafe said as he looked around the room regretfully.

After a long moment to collect himself, Rafe finally said, "It isn't decided yet, we'll have to present it to the whole community before enacting anything like this, but if it passes, then each newly made Shadesider will basically have to go on trial and defend their right to exist. If the person who made them is a being of good conscience, then they will stand to defend them. And, when all is said and done, a judgement will be made."

"Are you talking about killing the new Shadesiders?" Dodger asked in horror.

"Not all of them. Only those who are judged to be a detriment to our society." Rafe said reluctantly.

"Like me." Lane said bravely.

Duran immediately took hold of Lane's hand and gave it a firm squeeze.

At Rafe's curious look, Lane explained, "I'm an unemployed video store clerk with a crap high school education. I'm nothing to look at and no one important. I'm the kind of person that you're going to decide to kill, right?"

"You're important to me." Duran whispered in a rush.

"Excuse me, but who are you?" Rafe slowly asked, then looked to Dodger with question.

"This is Lane. My nephew's boyfriend and someone who is becoming important to me as well." Dodger said as he looked Rafe in the eyes.

After a moment to consider, Rafe suddenly looked around the room and said, "Wait! No! I'm not talking about any of you. We'll have the meeting with the community and let everyone know what's going on and 'why' we feel the need to do this before anyone is put on trial. Anyone who was turned before that time won't have to worry about it."

"It still seems wrong. Most people don't have any say in their own creation." Dodger said honestly.

"I know. I hope that the community will heed the warning and that the trials will be an empty threat that we never have to resort to using. But we're doing what we think is best to protect us all." Rafe said frankly.

"I understand what you're saying, but I don't have to like it." Dodger said honestly.

"I know. I don't like it either." Rafe whispered regretfully.

"Duran, what do you say? Let's go visit with the family. I'll promise you an all night party and that no one will wake you before sundown." Duncan said with a smile at his son.

"You said that Lane can come with us, right?" Duran asked hopefully.

"Sure. In fact, Evan and his friend here can come, too, if you'd like. That way Lane won't be as likely to feel like the odd man out." Duncan said with a smile at Evan and Brian.

"And I could take the car, so we can come home whenever we want." Brian said with a look of question at Dodger.

"Have fun, all of you." Dodger said with a genuine smile.

"Thanks for everything." Lane said as he rushed over to Dodger and gave him a firm hug.

Dodger laughed as he accepted the hug, then asked, "What was that for?"

"Just now, when we were talking about trials, you kinda defended me and said that I was important to you.... thanks. I won't forget it." Lane said from the hug.

"You have a place here with us where you belong, Lane. You and Duran should think about moving up here, we have plenty of room." Dodger whispered into his ear.

Lane pulled back with surprise, then slowly broke into a smile and said, "I'll talk to him about it."

"Go on. Everyone's waiting." Dodger said as he put his hands on Lane's shoulders and turned him around.

"Thanks, Desi." Duncan said as his eyes glistened with tears of happiness.

"Have fun, guys." Dodger said as he waved at all the others departing.

Rafe and Dodger walked to the door and watched as everyone got in their cars.

"How about I start us a fire?" Rafe whispered into Dodger's ear.

"Sounds perfect." Dodger said with a smile as he closed the door.

Part 6: New Blood

Chapter 21

"Agent Roberts reporting for duty."

"Agent Shawn Roberts?"

"Yes sir."

"Drop the 'sir', I work for a living. I'm Agent Simmons, but you can call me Gary."

"Yes sir... Gary. My orders say that I'm supposed to report to you to receive my first field assignment."

"Your first, huh? Lucky me. Oh well, I suppose that no one goes through all the training to end up behind a desk. You gotta get your feet wet sometime."

Agent Roberts didn't have a response for that, so he waited anxiously to be told what to do.

"I guess this assignment makes more sense to me now that I know I'm being saddled with a rookie. The long and short of it is, we've been ordered to investigate the kidnapping of a child... let's see... here it is... his name is Devin Barnes. He disappeared from his home in Rockport, Connecticut three weeks ago. Yesterday we received photographic evidence of him being in Columbus, Ohio."

"And a minor being transported across state lines without parental approval would make it our jurisdiction." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"That's right. What's more, it appears that the boy has been severely abused. The police officers that took the photographs weren't able to subdue the boy. He ran off into the woods and they weren't able to find him again."

"How sure are we that it was really him?"

"There's little doubt. They had him cornered for a few minutes and were able to snap several pictures of him while they were trying to talk him down."

"Were they able to gather any information about his abductors?"

"None. The boy seemed to be on his own. By all accounts, Devin seemed to be almost feral. The officers on the scene said that he didn't seem to comprehend their spoken words."

"That may indicate some type of drug being used to control the boy."

"Nothing in my reading of the report raised any red flags about that with me, but you can read over the reports for yourself on the way and maybe you can spot something."

"On the way to where?"

"Columbus, Ohio."

"When are we leaving?"

"Just as soon as you stop asking questions."

"You mean that we're leaving *right now*?"

"Now I see how you made it into the FBI, with deductive reasoning skills like that." Agent Simmons chuckled.

"Will I have time to go back to my apartment and pack something?"

"Sure, if you don't mind taking a later flight. Of course, I'm going on ahead while there's still a chance of finding that missing boy."

"That's okay. I'll find a way to manage. The job comes first."

"A piece of advice, Rookie. Always keep a bugout bag with you, ready to go. When we get called out, it usually isn't for high tea. Most of the time it's for something dirty, dangerous and extremely time-sensitive."

"I'll remember that."

"Good. Come on. They won't hold the flight for us."

* * * * *

"From what I'm reading here, I'm not seeing a motive for a kidnapping. The parents aren't particularly wealthy and there hasn't been any ransom note." Agent Roberts said once their plane had taken to the air.

"It could just be some pervert who likes to bugger little boys."

"Then why would his captors let the boy go out on his own?"

"Maybe he escaped."

"But if that were the case, why wouldn't he accept help from the police?"

"Trauma, maybe. Or it could be that the boy was raised to be afraid of, or even to hate the police. That's not too uncommon nowadays."

"I suppose that could be it. I've seen plenty of examples of people demonizing the police and yet who do they call at the first sign of trouble? It makes no sense."

"If you want to deal with people who make sense, you're in the wrong line of work."

"Wait. What's this? According to the Rockport investigation, Devin had made mention of being 'stalked' before his disappearance."

"Yes. If not for that, this probably would have been treated as a 'runaway' situation."

"The look in his eyes. He doesn't even look human anymore."

"Those pictures are haunting, aren't they?"

"They're horrifying. How could a sweet looking kid from a middle class neighborhood in Connecticut all of a sudden be transformed into an animal like this?"

"Another thing to consider is disease. Although that wouldn't account for the supposed abduction, it might be able to explain such a radical change in his personality."

"What are you suggesting?"

"Rabies... or some other communicable disease that can cause the victim to lose higher brain function."

"I can't say that I've ever studied much about anything like that."

"Like I said, it doesn't help to explain the abduction, so it's not likely to be relevant. Even so, at this stage of things we can brainstorm the possibilities so that we're more likely to spot evidence to support one of our crackpot theories."

"Do you know if anyone has followed up on the 'stalker'?"

"So far, all we've been able to come up with is the testimony of the few people that Devin mentioned it to. There hasn't been any evidence to suggest that there even *was* a stalker. I suppose that another possibility might be mental illness. Devin might have been experiencing paranoia and was seeing a 'stalker' as a symptom of his decline into madness."

"That might be worth investigating. It fits in with the established facts. But if it were mental illness, there should have been warning signs before he went off the deep end like this. Something this severe doesn't typically manifest overnight."

"I'm going to put in a request to the investigators in Connecticut to inquire further about Devin's mental state prior to his disappearance. It could give us a clue as to whether we might be dealing with drug addiction, mental illness or something else."

"What will we be doing when we land? I'm guessing that we won't have time to go to a hotel and get settled in."

"We're going to be met at the airport by Agent Abernathy from the local field office. We'll be filled in on any new leads or developments and carry on from that point."

"Why are we being flown in if they already have local agents?"

"It comes down to specialization and experience. I'm sure that the Columbus agents are perfectly competent and qualified to investigate several different types of routine incidents. But apparently this is something far enough outside their area of expertise that they feel it's better to call in someone who's encountered such situations before."

"So do you mostly get called in on kidnapping cases?"

"No." Gary said simply and seemed to consider his choice of words carefully before continuing, "Some cases require you to 'think outside the box'. Whatever this is doesn't appear to be motivated by greed or politics. There's no indication of a relationship having been established that would make this 'a crime of passion' or anything like that."

"So you were called in because there's no clear motivation?"

"It's not just that. In this instance, there's no tangible evidence that a crime has even been committed. We know that Devin went missing, but we can't definitively say that he was abducted. That's an assumption on our part."

"I think I get it. This is so open ended that the investigation could take off in any direction. So rather than burden the local office with something that might grow out of control, they bring us in to focus on this case to the exclusion of everything else going on."

"Yes. Something like that. Although we will depend on Agent Abernathy to fill us in on any local cases that might share common threads with Devin's case."

"What do you think the chances are that we'll be able to return Devin to his family, safe and sound?"

"Listen, Rookie. Sometimes you just have to content yourself with finding the answer."

* * * * *

"Agent Simmons, Agent Roberts? I'm Agent Willem Abernathy. Welcome to Columbus."

"Thank you. Have there been any new developments in the case in the past few hours?"

"Possibly. There have been reports of missing pets near the area where we encountered the boy. That might be related."

"We haven't considered the possibility of cult activity. That might be worth looking into." Shawn said thoughtfully.

Agent Simmons nodded, then asked, "Agent Abernathy, could you possibly get us information about known cults and recent cult activity in the area?"

"That might take some doing. Although we haven't been able to pin anything down, there have been rumors of a secret society operating in Columbus for decades."

"It's unlikely that anything that well established could be responsible for Devin's disappearance. I have a feeling that what we're looking for is a bit more 'ragtag'."

"I'll ask around and see what I can uncover for you."

"Where are we going first?"

"I thought that you'd want to see the site where the pictures were taken. Maybe you'll be able to spot something that we didn't know to look for."

"I don't know about that, but I guess it's a place to start."

* * * * *

"Okay. Give me the history. How did you find out that the boy was here?"

"One of the residents spotted him digging through garbage cans and called the local police. As a matter of course, they forwarded the photographs that they took to us and our computer was able to make a match."

"When the boy escaped, where did he go?"

"Over there, into the park."

"Did they pursue him?"

"Yes, for a few minutes, anyway. The thing is, they didn't have any idea that he was anything other than a typical homeless youth at that point. When they lost track of him in a heavily wooded area, they broke off their chase, resigned to the fact that he would turn up eventually... one way or another."

"Is that your way of saying dead or alive?"

"Yes. That's what I'm saying."

"That's life in the big city, Rookie. Homeless people die. Sometimes they're kids. We don't have to like it, but we*do* have to accept it, or we won't be able to focus on doing our jobs."

"Is there a large homeless population residing in the park?"

"No. It's a little too rustic for most of them. Actually, the homeless tend to steer clear of this area."

"Do we have time for me to have a look around?"

"Don't get too full of yourself, Rookie. Don't be thinking that you know it all."

"Do you have a more productive strategy in mind?"

"Yes. I'm getting familiar with the background so that I can determine what still needs to be investigated."

"That sounds like a good plan. While you're doing that, I'll be here, walking around the park looking for leads. Call me on my cell when you're done."

"You seem to be awfully sure of yourself all of a sudden."

"Am I a member of this team or your personal assistant, following you around, waiting on you to tell me what to do?"

"Well, to be honest, I expected for you to tag along behind me for at least a few weeks, absorbing my 'pearls of wisdom', but then I'd be forced to kick you out of the nest so that you could try to become your own person." Gary said frankly, then added, "Let's give this a try. If it ends up not working out, there's still plenty of room in the nest."

"I'll remember that." Agent Roberts said with a smile, then thought to ask, "Do you have my cell number?"

"Yeah. It was included in your assignment paperwork. You got mine?"

"Yes. I made sure to add it to my contact list before I reported for duty."

"Fine. Call if you run into any trouble."

* * * * *

Agent Roberts was startled by the sound of his cell phone ringing.

"Hello?" He answered unsteadily as he put the phone to his ear.

"I finished going over the local cult activity with Agent Abernathy and I thought that I'd check in with you. Have you been able to come up with anything?"

"I don't know."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Rookie. There may not be anything to find."

"The last thing I remember was being in the parking lot talking to you and Agent Abernathy. I snapped out of it just now when my phone rang. Now I'm in a restaurant... somewhere."

"Are you saying that you don't remember anything that happened to you in the past three hours?"

"I guess so. I can't be sure about anything at the moment. I'm still a little out of it, like I just woke up from a deep sleep."

"Give me your location and I'll take you to a doctor."

"No. Except for the gaping hole in my memory, I think that I'm fine."

"We'll need to do a comprehensive drug test to try to account for your missing memories."

"I haven't had anything to eat or drink since I arrived in Columbus so it seems highly unlikely that I could have been drugged."

"This doesn't have anything to do with uncovering the truth. This is about covering your ass and eliminating alternative explanations."

"Fine. Give me a second." Shawn said into the phone, then he could be heard saying more distantly, "Excuse me, but I need to call for a ride. Can you tell me where this is?"

Agent Simmons couldn't hear the response, but a moment later Shawn said into the phone, "I'm at the White Castle on Alum Creek Drive."

"Hold on. I need to be sure that Abernathy knows where that is." Agent Simmons said seriously.

Shawn waited anxiously, and noticed that he had empty food wrappers and a beverage container on the table before him.

"She knows where it is, but she wants to know how you got all the way out there."

"I'd like to know that too. I'm going to do a little investigating while I wait for you to show up."

"Be careful, Rookie. Don't make the mistake of assuming that things are what they appear to be. It's possible that you're being set up to 'discover' something."

"I'll keep my eyes open. Ring me when you get here."

"Will do."

* * * * *

"Excuse me. Do you have a minute? I need to ask you a question."

"I got me a old man at home an two babies. Ain't gonna happen." The cashier said flatly. She was wearing a name badge that said 'Cheryl' and a weary expression.

"No. It's nothing like that. I just wondered if you were here when I came in."

"Yeah. I guess so. I been here since eleven."

"Did you see if I came in with anyone else? You see, I can't remember. I just woke up here." Shawn quietly explained.

"Got roofied, huh? I'm guessin you came in with the lunch rush. I got no idea if you came in with someone else. First I noticed, you was sittin over there munching your fries."

"So you don't remember if I ordered the food I was eating?"

"Listen, I see maybe two hundred people in the space of an hour during lunch rush. Don't ask me to remember any one of 'em."

"Do you think anyone else might have noticed?"

"Prolly not. I got the best view of the dining room from the register." Cheryl said simply, then added more firmly, "If you'll excuse me, these nice folks behind you look hungry and they prolly don't have all the time in the world to be waiting on you."

"Yes. Of course. But please ask around to see if anyone might have seen me come in or how I got here."

"I'll do what I can." Cheryl responded, then looked past Agent Roberts and said, "Welcome to White Castle. What can I get for you today?"

* * * * *

Shawn went back to the table where he had awakened and looked at the opposing seat to see if there was any indication that someone might have been sitting with him.

Nothing immediately caught his eye, so he opened his drink container and carefully sniffed to see if he could detect anything out of the ordinary that might have been added to it.

Again, there wasn't anything obvious, but he resolved himself to taking the drink container with him so that it could also be tested.

After taking his seat again, he surreptitiously looked around the dining room to see if anyone appeared to be watching him, either having recognized his predicament or possibly to observe their handiwork.

Everyone seemed to be enjoying their meals and paying no attention to him whatsoever.

"Man, I axed around in the back and no one saw nothin." Cheryl said as she approached his table.

"Thanks for checking. I appreciate it." Shawn said sincerely.

"Did they get your money or anything?"

Shawn took out his wallet and quickly verified its contents before saying, "No. In fact, whoever did this to me must have paid for my meal because every bit of my money's still here."

"They roofied you up and didn't even take your money? All I can figure is that you musta been sperm-jacked. All dressed up in that suit like that, it wouldn't surprise me. You prolly a good catch. Don't be surprised if in a month or two some bitch shows up an says you gone be a daddy."

Shawn's eyes went wide at the suggestion.

"Breaks over. Good luck, Baby Daddy." Cheryl said with a sympathetic grin at him before returning to the kitchen.

Shawn looked back at the table and fought harder than ever to try and retrieve some sort of memory of what had happened in the past three hours.

* * * * *

"How you doing, Rookie?" Agent Simmons asked as Shawn got into the car.

"I'm about as freaked out as I've ever been." Shawn said honestly.

"Abernathy's going to drive us to the hospital now. Have you remembered anything?"

"No. It's like those hours of my life were completely edited out."

"Well, the good news is that there haven't been any reports of a bank robbery or a shooting spree during that time frame, so at least you don't have to worry about that."

"Good to know. I hadn't really thought about it, but it *is* possible that I could have done something illegal during that time."

"We'll worry about that if the time comes. For now, let's just focus on what we know and what we can verify with evidence and facts."

"We know that I was at the location by the park. We know that three hours later I was at the White Castle. I don't know where to begin with what happened in between."

"The drug test may provide some answers."

"I brought my drink from White Castle, just in case they slipped me something in there."

"Seems unlikely, but it's worth checking."

"Hold on. Incoming message." Agent Abernathy said from the driver's seat as she put a hand to her earpiece and said, "Abernathy here. Go ahead."

Gary and Shawn went silent and waited.

"Acknowledged. Secure the scene and we'll be there as quickly as we can."

There was another long silent moment as Agent Abernathy touched her earpiece again, then she said, "Police report an abandoned car with Connecticut plates located in Reynoldsburg. They're securing the scene and will wait for us to arrive."

"Any word on the owner of the car?"

"It was reported stolen three weeks ago. As soon as local FBI operatives arrive on the scene, they'll start working on trying to trace the car back using traffic cameras and other video surveillance."

"Good. With any luck, the driver will have stopped at an ATM somewhere along the way."

"The hospital's up ahead. Why don't I drop you two there and continue on to the scene?" Agent Abernathy asked seriously.

"I'm a big boy. I don't need for someone to hold my hand. Why don't you two go on ahead and I'll call when I'm done with the blood test?"

"No can do. If anything comes of the blood test, we're going to need corroborating testimony about how the samples were collected. I can't say that me being there will help our case, but me *not* being there will only open us up to another avenue to have our findings questioned." Agent Simmons said frankly.

Shawn didn't dispute the senior agent's words and waited as Agent Abernathy pulled to a stop by the hospital entrance.

* * * * *

Walking into the hospital, Shawn was dreading what was to come.

"They should be expecting us. I called ahead." Agent Simmons assured him.

As they walked to the main reception area, Gary took the lead and said, "We're Agents Roberts and Simmons from the FBI. I was told that there would be someone here to expedite the process of gathering blood samples."

"Yes sir. We have someone on the way, he should be here any minute. If you'll please take this paperwork and fill it out, he should be here before you're finished."

Shawn inwardly groaned at the chore before him, but understood the necessity of it.

* * * * *

"Agents Simmons and Roberts?" A pleasant looking man asked as he walked into the waiting area.

"Yes. Over here." Agent Simmons said as Shawn continued to answer a variety of health related questions.

"I'm Dr. Raphael Killian, I was called in to personally oversee your testing. Before we begin, I'd just like to know what it is that we're looking for."

"Something unusual happened to Agent Simmons. If it's possible, we'd like to find out if it's somehow drug related."

"I assume that you're not talking about recreational use." Dr. Killian said in a leading tone.

"No. Agent Roberts and I were together, about four hours ago and everything was fine. When we parted company to investigate separately, something happened and the next thing he knew, he was in a White Castle, several miles away, three hours later. He has no memory of how he got there."

"White Castle?" Dr. Killian asked cautiously.

"Yeah. The one on Alum Creek Drive. Is that significant?" Agent Simmons asked hopefully.

"No. I just haven't had lunch and... never mind. Are you just about done with the paperwork?"

"Is it ever *completely* done? It seems like the more I do, the more there is to do."

"Yes. That *is* one of the mysteries of the universe." Dr. Killian said with an understanding smile, then continued, "You can bring the clipboard with you. We need to get this started."

"I brought this drink from White Castle. Could you test it to see if anything's been added to it?"

"Yes, of course. The sooner we get this started, the sooner we'll be finished."

Shawn was only too happy to comply.

* * * * *

Agent Simmons watched as Dr. Killian walked around the treatment room, gathering what he would need to perform the blood tests.

"Tell me, Agent Roberts, how are you feeling? Do you have a headache?"

"No."

"A stiff neck or aching joints?"

"No."

"What about classic flu symptoms?"

"No. Except for being freaked out by what just happened to me, I'm fine."

"You know, in the past, when someone needed a blood test done, I'd usually get a phlebotomist or at most, a nurse, taking care of it. I don't think I've ever had an actual 'doctor' perform the blood tests before." Agent Simmons said thoughtfully.

"I normally wouldn't be called in. I'm an expert in infectious diseases and immunology and I sometimes collaborate with the CDC on certain cases. I was in my office when the call came in about an FBI agent needing a drug screening and it set off some alarms with the hospital staff, so they called me." Dr. Killian said to Agent Simmons, then turned to Agent Roberts and said, "Please take off your jacket and roll up your sleeve."

"Why would a drug screening cause them to call you?" Agent Simmons asked suspiciously.

"We've had cases that appeared on the surface to be drug related that ended up being biological in nature. The staff here know to call me when something doesn't sound right to them. When I'm called, I decide if I'll investigate it personally or not." Dr. Killian said as he swabbed the crook of Shawn's arm.

"So you think that this could be something viral?" Agent Simmons asked carefully.

"Not necessarily, but it would be foolish to dismiss the possibility when we can prove or disprove the notion with a simple blood test at this early stage of things." Dr. Killian said to Agent Simmons, then turned his attention to Agent Roberts and quietly said, "This will sting, just for a second."

Agent Roberts was surprised to realize that he barely felt the needle at all. Dr. Killian had a gentle touch and obviously had enough experience to have 'perfected' the art of drawing blood.

"So if it's viral, what are we looking at?" Agent Simmons asked cautiously.

"The first thing that comes to mind is Naegleria Fowleri, also known as Brain Eating Amoeba." Dr. Killian said frankly, then hurriedly continued, "I'm not saying that that's what we're dealing with here. In fact, that's very unlikely. But the complete loss of memory for a specific period of time automatically makes me think of something like that."

Agents Simmons and Roberts were silent as they watched Dr. Killian carefully apply a printed label to the vial of blood that he had drawn.

"Something's eating my brain?" Agent Roberts finally asked.

"No. Almost certainly not. But it's possible that something's been introduced into your system that mimics that aspect of the disease. Will you disrobe for me?"

"Excuse me?" Agent Roberts asked uneasily.

"I need to do a visual survey to rule out any animal or insect bites. It won't take but a minute."

"Nothing's bitten me." Shawn immediately defended.

"Not that you know of. But what about during that missing period of time? It would be irresponsible of me to take you at your word and it will just take a minute to rule out the possibility."

"If something did bite me, does that make the brain eating thing more or less likely?" Shawn quietly asked as he began to undress.

"More, especially if it's an animal bite."

"So you're worried that it might be something like rabies?" Agent Simmons asked carefully.

"Yes. I suppose so. The transmission vector would essentially be the same and some of the symptomology might be similar."

"Is there something going around like that, because if there is, I haven't heard anything about it." Agent Simmons asked cautiously.

"All it takes is one little mutation for something that was once benign to become deadly. In my line of work, I'm reminded every day of how little it takes for a devastating disease to come into being. That's why I'm here, to try and catch the early 'first' cases before they can spread unchecked throughout the world."

"Do you think that's what we have here?" Shawn asked as he sat down to take off his shoes.

"Let me have a look at you, then I'll be in a much better position to answer." Dr. Killian said seriously, then thought to ask, "You haven't noticed any indication of recent sexual activity, have you?"

"No. But the cashier at White Castle suggested that I might have been roofied and sperm-jacked while I was unconscious. Do you think that's what happened to me?" Agent Roberts asked uneasily as he pulled down his pants.

"Not really. I'm just asking because it's another transmission vector to investigate." Dr. Killian said assuringly, then hesitantly asked, "So you haven't noticed any indication of anal penetration?"

"No! Why would you even think that?" Shawn asked with surprise.

"Again, I'm just trying to rule out transmission vectors."

"Are you saying that someone might have knocked me out and raped me while I was unconscious?"

"I'm saying that it happens. But if it were something like that, you'd know it. The type of person who'd drug you and rape you isn't likely to be gentle about it."

"I guess not."

"All of it." Dr. Killian said as he gestured toward Shawn's boxer shorts.

Shawn glanced at Agent Simmons uncomfortably, then pulled down his shorts in one quick move.

Dr. Killian was silent as he carefully examined Shawn's naked body.

Agents Simmons and Roberts both waited anxiously as the doctor conducted his investigation.

"Good. You can get dressed. There's no indication that you were bitten either by an insect or an animal." Dr. Killian said as he made a note on his clipboard.

"So, is that it? Have you checked everything out?" Shawn asked as he began to dress.

"All that's left is to look at the results of your blood tests and the test on your drink. That could take several hours."

"Doctor, based on what you've seen so far, have you found any indication of what we might be dealing with? Even if it's not based on empirical evidence, it might give us a place to start looking."

"No. All I can do at this point is try to eliminate as many possibilities as I can. Once that's done, we can look at what's left."

"We'll be waiting for your findings. Will you forward the results to the local FBI office?"

"That depends on what they are. If I don't find anything of concern, I'll forward the report. Otherwise I'll contact you directly regarding further tests or questions that I might have."

"Do you have our contact information?" Agent Simmons thought to ask.

"I have Agent Roberts' cell number on the paperwork he just filled out, if you'd like to write your number down, I'll consider you a secondary contact."

Agent Simmons did so, then watched as the doctor left.

* * * * *

"I just texted Abernathy and she said that she'll be here in a few minutes. How about we have her take us to a decent hotel so you can take some time to collect yourself?"

"Are you kidding me? I want to go back to that park and try to figure out what happened to me! Three hours of my life were stolen from me and I want them back."

"That may not be such a good idea, considering what's already been done to you."

"Listen, the way I see it, I must have stumbled onto something really big for such a drastic thing to have happened to me. We're on the right track. We've got to be. Let's not squander this opportunity."

"You're attributing a lot of meaning to a missing period of time."

"Am I wrong? Doesn't this just *scream* to be explored and investigated?"

"You *may* be onto something. We'll go... together... and investigate."

Chapter 22

"Did you find anything out?" Agent Abernathy asked as they pulled away.

"Only that your local health care system seems to take things a lot more seriously than other places that I've been. Instead of a nurse or a lab worker, we were helped by a doctor, a *specialist,* and he seemed to be really on top of things." Agent Simmons responded seriously.

"How are you holding up, Roberts?" Agent Abernathy asked as she glanced at him in her rear-view mirror.

"Don't worry about me. I'm not going to wimp out. I was all about figuring this out before, but now it's *personal*."

"Good for you. Just don't let your determination get in the way of your professionalism. Remember that whatever you do, you're going to have to be able to defend your actions after the fact." Agent Abernathy said seriously.

"Good advice. Be sure to keep everything on the up-and-up so that whatever actions you take can't be called into question." Agent Simmons added.

"I'm not going to go rogue. Let's just say that I'm uniquely motivated to get to the bottom of this."

"Good. Then listen up. We've been able to come up with some information about local cult activity. At this point I can't say that it's related to our case at all, but you need to hear this so we can all be on the lookout for any signs of it."

"Sounds serious. What are we talking about?"

"Apparently, it's been going on for decades." Agent Abernathy said slowly, then continued, "Every now and then some kind of 'death cult' will rise up and cause all kinds of trouble for a while. The strange thing is, just as suddenly as they arrive, they also seem to disappear."

"The Autumn People."

"What's that?"

"Nothing. It's just something from a kid's story that I read once."

"No. Please go on. If it bears any resemblance to this case, then I'd like to hear about it."

"The Autumn People, the hungry ones, they appear each generation to feed on our nightmares and delight in our pain."

"I think I'd better be keeping a closer watch on what my kids are reading." Agent Abernathy said slowly.

"The thing that made me think of them is the way they blow into town on an autumn wind and cause all kinds of trouble, and then before anyone can realize what they're doing, they disappear, leaving only misery in their wake."

"Roberts, if I ever invite you over to my house, you are *not* to tell stories to my grandkids." Agent Simmons said firmly.

"All I'm saying is that the timing of your 'cult activity' sounds to be like the story of the Autumn People." Agent Roberts explained, then cautiously asked, "How long has it been since the last report of that type of activity?"

"It's only been three years."

"What was the previous incident like?"

"I wasn't with the bureau then, but according to the reports, there was about a five hundred percent increase in criminal activity of all kinds within a matter of days. Most of the perpetrators seemed to be from out of town, but none of them were ever arrested. There were some horrifying incidents of arson, vandalism and brutal random violence, but the perpetrators were always gone before police arrived. No one at the scene could identify any of them, they all stated that they'd never seen them before."

"How did it end?" Agent Simmons asked cautiously.

"Just like he said, all of a sudden, everyone was standing around wondering what the hell had just happened. It was just... over."

"If I remember the story correctly, those that had fallen into the Autumn Peoples' traps were condemned to leave with them, never to be seen again."

"Seriously. You read some fucked up shit as a kid." Agent Simmons said uneasily.

"I know it's just a story, but I'm still going to count it as one more reason to keep pressing forward. We've got to rescue Devin. If we're caught in something that could suddenly end at any moment, we're his only chance."

"I guess it's time to see if it's all talk." Agent Abernathy said as she pulled the car to a stop. "We're here."

* * * * *

"Do you want to come back for us?" Agent Simmons asked as he and Agent Roberts got out of the car.

"No. I've already called my husband and let him know that I'm going to be late. I'm going with you." Agent Abernathy said firmly.

"Glad to have you along." Agent Simmons said as he waited for her to join them.

"Where do we start?" Shawn asked nervously.

"When we left you before, you were walking toward that park entrance." Agent Abernathy said as she gestured toward a path which led into the wooded area.

"It's going to be dark soon. Will we need flashlights?" Shawn thought to ask.

"Actually, that might be a good idea. I've got some in the trunk." Agent Abernathy said as she doubled back to the car.

The others followed and were surprised to find just how 'well stocked' the trunk of her car was.

"I've got my sidearm, but do you think that we might need a little more 'stopping power'?" Agent Simmons cautiously asked.

"I'd rather carry it and not need it than need it and not have it." Abernathy said as she automatically handed guns to her companions.

"Aren't these illegal?" Shawn asked as he examined the weapon in his hand.

"Not for us, they're not." Abernathy said simply, then handed him extra clips.

Shawn loaded a clip, then checked to see that his flashlight was functioning properly.

"Let's do this before we lose the light." Agent Simmons finally said, then started leading the way.

"Do you want for me to call in a few more agents to help us with the search?" Agent Abernathy asked as she followed.

"Let's wait until we actually *find* something before we do anything like that. So far, all we know is that a boy who disappeared from Connecticut was spotted here. Until we can show that he or his captors are still here, there's no point in us calling for more manpower." Agent Simmons said as he slowly walked toward the treeline, carefully taking in every detail.

"What about the stuff that happened to me?" Shawn asked cautiously.

"There's no proof that that's in any way related to what we're looking for."

As they entered the wooded area, Shawn could see that the trail seemed to branch off in two directions.

"Which way do you want to go?" Abernathy asked cautiously.

"It looks like the left path will take us to another entrance. Let's go right." Simmons said decisively.

Although Shawn was in the habit of second-guessing decisions and questioning authority, he was more than happy to allow Agent Simmons to take the lead in this investigation.

* * * * *

"Abernathy, did you notice the reports of missing pets being in any particular area?" Agent Simmons asked as they slowly walked.

"No. There was no pattern that I could see. They were all just in close proximity to the park."

"So it's possible that whoever has Devin is catching and killing house pets. Animal cruelty is a common theme in the histories of most of the mass murderers and serial killers of the modern age." Agent Simmons said slowly.

"Or they could be catching them for food." Shawn interjected.

"What's that?" Agent Abernathy asked curiously.

"We've assumed that they're catching and killing pets as either some kind of religious rite or to get their psychopathic jollies. But what if they're just hungry?" Shawn asked uncomfortably.

"The police report *did* say that Devin was found looking through garbage cans." Agent Abernathy said slowly.

"It makes more sense than just about anything else in this case." Agent Simmons added.

"Maybe if we brought some food, we might be able to lure them out." Shawn said thoughtfully.

"Depending on what we find tonight, we may consider that our next step." Agent Simmons said decisively.

"What's that?" Agent Abernathy asked suddenly.

"What did you see?" Agent Simmons asked as he followed her gaze.

"A light, over there, to the right, close to the ground." She said as she took slow careful steps in that direction.

Suddenly, all around them, small discreet lights lit up along the path.

"This park isn't quite as 'rustic' as I was led to believe." Agent Simmons said as he relaxed.

"No. This is actually kind of nice... well, except for the pet killing, kidnapping psychopath who seems to be living here."

"Well, you can't have everything." Agent Simmons said with a grin.

"Wait. If the park is lit up at night and is in such a central city location, why don't the homeless people live here?" Shawn asked cautiously.

"I had been assuming that it was because it was so rugged. But now that you mention it, I can't think of any reason that this wouldn't be an attractive location for them." Agent Abernathy said thoughtfully.

"Can you recall any incidents involving this park in the recent past?"

"Nothing comes to mind. There's always something going on in the downtown area, but the park... you'd expect for it to have higher than average crime statistics. Parks typically do." Agent Abernathy said in realization.

"So, is our kidnapper part of what's going on here or is he intruding on something that's always been here?" Agent Roberts asked thoughtfully.

"Are you suggesting that there's something or someone keeping order in this park that is completely separate from the authorities?" Agent Simmons asked cautiously.

"Yes. That's *exactly* what I'm suggesting. This park is well lit, reasonably maintained, has public restroom facilities and even running water, and yet the homeless population seem to avoid it like the plague. I don't think it's too far-fetched to suggest that something's going on here." Agent Roberts said reasonably.

"Okay. If we carry that line of reasoning further, then I suppose that the kidnapper is most likely not here by invitation. His presence would seem to go against the status quo that has been maintained here. It's likely that he arrived in town with his victim and found this perfectly lovely location not being used by anyone else, so he claimed it for his own."

Agent Abernathy nodded, then carefully added, "If that were the case, then there might be some counter-force also searching for the kidnapper, since he broke the sanctity or whatever it is that keeps this place from being a drug-infested crime-ridden hellhole."

Both agents looked at her with surprise.

"Walk around downtown for a few minutes, you'll understand." Willem assured them.

"Okay, again, just for the sake of argument, let's assume that there is a counter-force at work. How likely do you think it is that Agent Roberts encountered the counter-force rather than the kidnapper?" Agent Simmons asked carefully.

"I'd say that it's almost a certainty. If our kidnapper is eating pets and garbage, he's probably not in a position to be wiping out people's memories." Agent Abernathy said frankly.

"So it follows that by us being here, we're not only looking for the kidnapper and his victim, but also the regulating force that maintains a state of peace in this area." Agent Simmons said thoughtfully.

"You shouldn't be here."

All three agents looked up suddenly and were surprised to find a skinny young man, barely more than a teenager, standing before them wearing jeans and a black hoodie.

"We're FBI agents and we're here investigating the disappearance of a young man. He's been spotted in this area." Agent Simmons said professionally.

Agent Abernathy stepped forward and held out her phone with a picture of Devin displayed.

"Have you seen this boy?"

"No. I haven't. But it's really not a good idea for you to be out here after dark. Investigate all you want during the light of day, but it's not safe for you out here at night."

"It's not safe for *us*? But it's safe for *you*?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Listen. I'll leave if you will. Just please, you've got to go right now." The boy urged.

"What's your name, young man?" Agent Simmons asked authoritatively.

"Lane Kingston. Can we go now?" Lane urged.

"What are you so afraid of?" Agent Abernathy asked curiously.

Lane froze in thought for a moment, then carefully said, "I know about Devin. Okay? The guy who went rogue and took him, he's already been dealt with. You don't have to worry about him. But right now we've got... people on the way here. They're going to help us catch Devin and see that he gets all the help that he needs. The thing is, if they catch you here it's going to turn into a really big mess. *All you've got to do is walk away right now and forget that you ever met me.*"

"C'mon Rookie. There's nothing to see here. Let's call it a night." Agent Simmons said simply.

"I'll drive you to a hotel so you guys can get set up. That way we'll be able to start fresh in the morning."

Agent Roberts looked at Lane apprehensively and quietly asked, "What did you do to them?"

"I'm just trying to help them by getting them out of the way of something dangerous. *Why don't you go with them*?" Lane asked as he looked deeply into Agent Roberts' eyes.

"You comin?" Agent Simmons asked insistently.

Shawn very nearly answered 'yes', but something within him fought against the compulsion and instead he answered, "Can I call you when I'm finished here?"

"Agent Abernathy is about to go off duty, so I'm going to get her to take me to get a rental car. Call me when you're done here."

"Will do." Shawn answered as he searched Agent Simmons' expression for any indication that he was aware of what was going on.

Agents Simmons and Abernathy turned around and walked down the path, back the way they came, without a care in the world as Agent Roberts watched them go.

"You should have gone with them." Lane said honestly.

"Maybe. But it was more important to me to learn the truth." Agent Roberts said frankly, then hesitantly asked, "What you just did to them, is that the same thing you did to me this afternoon?"

"Come on. We need to get moving. Devin's not in this area." Lane said as he indicated the path before them.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Agent Roberts persisted.

"You never would have known that anything was off if you'd been from Columbus. I could have just told you to forget about me and to go somewhere safe and everything would have been fine."

"But since I'm not from here, I wouldn't know where a safe place might be."

"Right. And with you being totally out of it, I couldn't just leave you on your own. I had to take you somewhere that I knew that no one would mess with you."

"So you took me to White Castle?"

"Yeah. If anyone tried to mess with you there, the entire dining room of customers would kick their asses. You'll never meet better, more down-to-earth people than White Castle customers."

"If you say so..."

"Shawn, what I'm trying to get at is that I didn't want for you to be hurt. I don't want for anyone to be hurt. If you'll let us do our work and resolve this, then everything can go back to normal."

"Who *are* you?"

"Lane Kingston."

"*What* are you?"

"That's a little more complicated. For now, let's just say that I'm one of the good guys and leave it at that."

* * * * *

They walked in silence for a few minutes until Agent Roberts quietly asked, "You could have made me leave and forget again if you wanted to, couldn't you?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you?"

"You remember when I said that I didn't want to hurt anyone?"

"Yeah."

"Every time I enthrall you and cause you to forget, it causes damage to your psyche. Conflicts arise in your subconscious that can eventually manifest in some fairly disturbing ways."

"Would wiping my memory *two* times cause that?"

"Probably not. But the way I enthralled your group was kind of a test for you. If you would have been capable of accepting my command and dropping the investigation, you would have left with the others. But since you're so tenacious, you were able to break the thrall and see through it."

"So that's it? You're just going to tell me everything that's going on?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"For now. If all goes well, everything will get resolved, then we'll be able to enthrall you again and your subconscious will be at peace with it."

"And if all *doesn't* go well?"

"Then we'll do what we have to do to protect ourselves." Lane said simply.

"Who is *we*?"

"That's another long story. I'm not going to tell you everything, mostly because you don't need to know. But what it comes down to is that there's this... disease, I guess. Those of us who have it have some... super powers. It feels really wrong to describe it that way, but it's close enough for what we're doing right now."

"What kind of super powers?"

"Well, you've already encountered the thrall. That's kind of like hypnosis. We also have improved strength, speed, hearing, eyesight... the list goes on, but you get the idea."

"Okay. So you're super people. What does that have to do with what we're doing right now?"

"Good question. Before I can get into that, you need to know that we're very careful that Brightsiders don't find out about us..."

"Brightsiders?"

"People like you. Along with our super powers come some super limitations. The biggest one is that Shadesiders can't go out in direct sunlight. Brightsiders can go into the light. Shadesiders can go *near* the light. And Darksiders despise the light and want to destroy it."

"I take it that you're speaking metaphorically, to some degree."

"Yeah. I do that sometimes. But we've gotten off track. We try to keep Brightsiders from finding out about us. That works out fine for the most part, but every now and then, someone will go rogue and start turning people."

"Infecting them with your disease?" Shawn asked to verify his understanding.

"Yeah. Our transformative can be passed by blood or by sex. So if a Shadesider or a Darksider were to bite someone and they survived, they would become one of us."

"So you're basically talking about vampires."

"Yes. Two distinct groups. The good vampires try to protect the Brightsiders and keep them from finding out about us. The bad vampires tend to find places to feed where they won't be noticed and are careful not to leave any of their victims alive."

"Hold on. When I went to the hospital for a blood test, the doctor made me strip naked and looked at me really carefully to be sure that I hadn't been bitten. He was checking me for vampire bites, wasn't he?"

"Yes. I guess you must have mentioned White Castle when you talked to him, because Rafe called me when he was done examining you and asked me about what was going on."

"Dr. Killian is one of you?"

"Yes. Even though it can be difficult at times, some of us have found ways to manage lives in the Brightsider world."

"So all that talk about 'brain eating amoebas' was just talk?"

"Yeah. He used to talk about hemorrhagic fever like that, but people aren't as afraid of that as they used to be." Lane said with a smile, then his expression became serious as he quietly said, "Be on alert. There's someone up ahead."

* * * * *

Agent Roberts took slow careful steps as he followed Lane into the next clearing. His hand automatically went to the weapon he had tucked in his belt.

"Oh, it's you!" Lane said with relief.

"It took you long enough! I was just about to call to see if you were alright." A younger teenager said with annoyance.

"Shawn, this is Duran, my husband." Lane said as he draped an arm around Duran's shoulders.

"It's nice to meet you." Agent Roberts said uncertainly.

"Is he the one from earlier?" Duran asked quietly.

"Yes. I could tell that he wouldn't be able to let it go until he saw for himself that things were resolved, so I brought him along."

"If Morgan finds out, he's going to explode."

"I'll count that as a bonus."

"I just heard from Kevin a few minutes ago. We need to go north. They may have found him."

"You up to a hike, Shawn?"

After making a point to look at his suit and dress shoes, Agent Roberts asked, "Do I have time to go and get some proper hiking gear?"

"Try to keep up." Lane said with a grin, then left the path and took off cross country.

* * * * *

Shawn did his best to keep up with the pair, but he was frankly in awe of their ability to travel across the untamed landscape without even a flashlight to guide them.

At one time or another he had seen each of them dart into places that he would swear that a rabbit couldn't go.

At one point he found Lane standing on a rise, watching him, waiting for him to catch up.

Agent Roberts had the distinct feeling that the pair could have traversed the distance in half the time if he hadn't been accompanying them.

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts finally arrived, Duran made a shushing motion.

With a few gestures, Lane and Duran indicated for Agent Roberts and another man to remain where they were and to stay silent.

After receiving matching nods from the pair, Duran and Lane moved so quickly that they almost seemed to vanish right before Shawn's eyes.

* * * * *

The minutes that followed were agonizing.

Agent Roberts and the unknown man stood silently, both listening for any indication of what was going on.

The sound of the man's cell phone ringing nearly made Agent Roberts jump out of his skin.

"This is Kevin. What'cha got?" The man asked by way of greeting.

Shawn waited anxiously for any clue to be revealed.

"We're on our way." Kevin said before disconnecting the call and putting his phone away.

Before Agent Roberts could ask, Kevin said, "They've got him, but they're going to need our help."

"Who are you?"

"Kevin Erickson. I'm guessing since you're on the sideline with me, that you're not one of them either." Kevin said as he forged their path through the untamed woods.

"No. I'm just a regular guy." Agent Roberts reluctantly admitted as he did his best to point the flashlight where it was needed.

"Don't let it get you down. They *need* people like us. I sometimes wish that they'd bring a few more in. They take too many unnecessary risks just to protect their *secret*." Kevin said as he determinedly pressed forward.

"People like us?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"Yes. We're their hands and eyes in the world of sunlight. The Shadesiders have amazing abilities and can do so much to improve the world, but they're hobbled by their aversion to sunlight and their need to remain hidden. Together we can realize possibilities that neither of us could conquer alone." Kevin said passionately.

"Forgive me for asking, but are you part of some kind of a religion or something?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I guess you could say that. I'm what's called a Behilflicher. My family line has been the daytime protectors of those we now call Shadesiders for thirteen generations. Although it isn't *exactly* a religion, I was raised to understand that I was born with a duty and a destiny."

"Thirteen generations? This thing is a whole lot bigger than what I'm seeing, isn't it?"

"Yes." Kevin chirped, then quickly added, "They should be just up ahead."

* * * * *

"You two, be sure to stay back until we have him under control." Lane said with difficulty.

Agent Roberts was surprised to see Lane, Duran and two others trying to overpower and subdue the naked, filthy version of Devin Barnes.

"What can we do to help you?" Kevin asked seriously.

"Some handcuffs would be nice." Lane immediately responded.

"That's not something I'm in the habit of carrying." Kevin said regretfully.

"Here you go." Agent Roberts said as he held a pair of handcuffs out to Kevin.

"Your new friend has some. Catch." Kevin called, then threw the handcuffs to Lane.

Agent Roberts was surprised when Lane's hand popped up and caught the handcuffs perfectly.

As Lane fought to get the cuffs on the boy, Agent Roberts caught his first good look at Devin's face.

Whereas he had been able to tell himself that everything so far had been mistaken perceptions and enthusiastic exaggerations, the hideously deformed face with snarling fangs finally convinced him that he was actually dealing with something beyond the 'natural'.

In addition to that drastic physical transformation, Agent Roberts could also see that Devin appeared to have some formidable claws, on both his hands and feet.

As Lane got one of the handcuffs placed, Devin suddenly twisted and arched his body and very nearly freed himself.

Without thinking, Agent Roberts drew his weapon and trained it on the boy as he held perfectly still.

"Please don't shoot him." Kevin said quietly from his side.

"I promise not to shoot unless I have no other choice." Agent Roberts said as he fought down his rising adrenaline.

"If they can capture him, we're hoping that we'll be able to help him." Kevin quietly explained.

"Help him? How?"

"That's not my department. But if they believe that they can do it, I think it's worth giving them every opportunity."

"What caused this to happen to him?" Agent Roberts asked as he continued to hold his gun steadily before him.

"I don't know his story, so I can only tell you what I believe based on the stories that I was told as a child."

Devin let loose a feral growl that sent a shiver up Agent Roberts' spine.

"It's been said that in the past, there were people among the peasantry who couldn't accept the blessing of the bite. Those wretched souls would divest themselves of all humanity and assume the forms of animals, living only for carnal pleasures, never to be human again."

"Could you tell me what that means in plain English?" Agent Roberts asked hopefully.

"Although it's basically unheard of in the modern age, I believe that what we've encountered is a werewolf."

"A werewolf? You mean with full moons, silver bullets and all of that?"

"Those are just things made up by authors and movie producers to make their stories more entertaining. In reality, the stories of *actual* werewolves are nothing less than tragic. By my understanding of it, werewolves are failed vampires. When the transformative organism is introduced into their bodies, the change that results is drastically different from Shadesiders or Darksiders. Mentally, they lose their sense of self and become wild animals. Physically, their bodies are able to transform to become almost animal in appearance."

"I've seen some pictures taken of Devin from yesterday and he looked... well, mostly human. He certainly didn't look anything like this."

"He can transform now. I doubt that he has the mental capacity to know that he's doing it, but there are times when he'll look entirely human and other times when he will look like a beast."

"But he was wearing clothes yesterday and today he's not."

"Again, I don't know anything about this boy specifically, you said his name was Devin? Well, if he were wearing clothes yesterday, that could indicate that he either hadn't completed the transformation yet or that he had only recently transformed and hadn't fully lost his humanity at that time."

"Does that mean that if they're able to subdue him, that they might be able to do something to help him?"

"That's the hope. As I said, there are no accounts of werewolves existing in the modern age. While I'm sure that Rafe has a plan, no one can be sure if it will work or not."

"Rafe? As in Dr. Killian?"

"Yes. He has the most knowledge about the transformative. He's been studying it for centuries. If there's anything that can be done to help Devin, he'll know about it."

"You can put your gun away. We got him." Duran called out.

Agent Roberts surveyed the scene before him and saw that they had Devin's hands cuffed behind his back and had the boy forced down on the ground with his face in the dirt.

"What do you need for us to do?" Kevin asked seriously.

"We're parked at 3rd and Reinhard. Go on ahead and see if you can arrange it so that we won't draw too much attention." Duran said decisively as he pitched Kevin his keys.

"Will you help me?" Kevin asked Agent Roberts hopefully.

"Sure. It'll be good to be able to do something to help."

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts and Kevin arrived at the street, it was like stepping into a different world. There was light traffic passing by and no one seemed to take notice of them at all.

"Good. It's not too busy." Kevin said with relief.

"What are we supposed to do?" Agent Roberts asked as he looked around.

"Open the trunk for them, then we'll do whatever else is necessary. We might have to provide a distraction so that they can get Devin into the car without being seen."

"I'm an FBI agent. I'm not sure that I should really be participating in something like this."

"FBI, huh? Tell me, why are you here? What kept you from calling in reinforcements at the fight or firing your gun back there?"

"I guess that I just wanted to know what was really going on."

"Then help us get Devin into the car. Whatever answers you're looking for are probably going to be at our destination."

"Do you know where that is?"

"No one's said, but I'd be willing to bet that we're going to Rafe and Dodger's house."

* * * * *

It seemed to take an inordinate amount of time for the four Shadesiders to carry the naked struggling boy out of the woods, but as soon as they cleared the park entrance, they had Devin in the trunk in the blink of an eye.

Lane and Duran got into the car where they had put Devin in the trunk, the other two Shadesiders hurried back into the park as Kevin and Agent Roberts got into Kevin's car.

Although Agent Roberts was aware that he had an opportunity to ask any questions that he might have, he found that he already had too much new information to process.

In the end, they rode in silence, each thinking their own thoughts.

Chapter 23

Agent Roberts didn't know what to expect, but was nonetheless surprised when they arrived at the secluded mansion on the hill.

"We'll need to stay in the car until they get Devin inside. If he were to bite one of them, they'd just have a bite to deal with. If he bites one of us, it could kill us." Kevin calmly explained.

"Wouldn't it just turn us into werewolves or vampires or something?"

"That's possible. But a certain percentage of people exposed to the transformative can't adapt to the change and die in transition."

"You said that your family protects the Shadesiders. Do they ever end up biting one of you?"

"There have been a few times when it came down to a choice of their survival or ours. In those cases, we've willingly sacrificed ourselves so that they might live."

"How can you live with that, knowing that you might have to give up your life for someone else?"

"They're our purpose. How could we go on living knowing that we could have done something to save them?"

"I can't imagine having such a clear vision of your purpose in life."

"We are truly blessed."

* * * * *

As soon as Devin had been carried inside, Kevin and Agent Roberts finally got out of the car.

As impressive as the entryway was with its immense porch leading to elegantly styled double doors, it paled in comparison to the spectacle of the grand ballroom inside.

Agent Roberts was frankly in awe of the enormous room styled with old world elegance. The curved staircase drew his eyes up to the balcony surrounding the room and on up to the crystal chandelier.

"What kind of place is this?" Agent Roberts whispered as he stared.

"This is Rafe and Dodger's home. I guess when you have an extended lifespan, you have time to make things be exactly the way you want them."

"Extended lifespan?"

"That's another benefit of the transformative... or maybe it's a curse. I guess it depends on how you choose to live your life."

"So when you said that Dr. Killian had been working for centuries..."

"Yeah. I was speaking literally."

"Where do we go now?"

"I'm guessing that we'll need to go to the basement. I can't think of anyplace else that Devin could be kept without wrecking the place." Kevin said as he walked to a door that was nearly hidden amongst all the ornate woodwork.

Agent Roberts followed along silently, not knowing what to expect.

* * * * *

"Be ready to run back upstairs. It's still possible that they could lose control of him." Kevin warned as they slowly started down.

Agent Roberts had his hand on his gun and was ready to run at the first sign of trouble.

As they descended the stairs, Agent Roberts could hear growling and frantic voices.

"He broke the handcuffs!"

"That's okay. Just finish his feet."

"Have you got him? I need to get him some juice."

"Yeah. Go ahead. We just have to finish tying him down."

As they continued down the stairs, Agent Roberts was finally able to see the expansive room.

His attention was immediately drawn to the crude wooden chair where Devin was being restrained.

"Are you sure that this will hold him?" Lane asked as he continued to wrap the struggling boy's forearms with heavy wire.

"He's weak from hunger so yeah, I'm sure." A young man answered as he crossed the room carrying a large sports drink bottle.

"If this is him being weak, I don't want to see what he's like when he's strong." Lane said frankly.

"That reminds me. Since you brought him here, it's going to be up to you to take care of him. You'll need to see that he's fed and watered and remember to clean up after him."

"Dodger! Isn't that kinda cold blooded? I mean, considering that Devin was a perfectly normal kid just a few days ago?" Lane asked challengingly.

"You're right. That was totally inappropriate of me." Dodger easily admitted, then added, "But still, remember what I said when it's time for 'walkies'."

"I don't know anything about werewolves. Is it even possible to potty train or housebreak them?" Duran asked thoughtfully.

"I don't know either. With any luck, maybe Rafe will be able to come up with something to help him before we have to find out." Dodger said hopefully.

"I think we've got him as secure as we're going to get him. Are you ready to feed him now?" Lane asked cautiously.

"Here you go." Dodger said as he offered the sports drink bottle.

Lane flashed him a dirty look before reluctantly accepting the drink.

Dodger smiled with satisfaction, then seemed to notice Agent Roberts in attendance.

"Hello. My name is Dodger Tribodeaux and this is my house. Are you the FBI agent that they were telling me about?"

"That's right. Agent Shawn Roberts." Shawn cautiously responded.

"Lane said that it was important for you to be here, but I haven't been filled in on the 'why'." Dodger finished with a significant look at Lane.

"He's been like this toward me ever since I married his nephew." Lane said to Agent Roberts with a slight eyeroll.

It was only then that Agent Roberts realized that Lane was holding the sports bottle forward so that Devin could drink from it.

"The timing just happens to be a coincidence." Dodger said as he tried to restrain a smile.

"Face it Lane, no one will ever be good enough for *his* nephew." Kevin said, not even bothering to hide his grin.

"Let's go have a seat and leave the boys to handle this. You, too, Kevin. We haven't visited for a while." Dodger suggested as he indicated a small sitting area across the room.

"Have you heard anything from Brian and Evan?" Kevin asked as he started walking.

Agent Roberts followed along, but kept at least *some* of his attention on the 'werewolf' across the room.

"No. But that's not unusual. I think the last that we heard they were visiting some acquaintances in Eastern Europe and introducing the boys to them, but you might ask Rafe about that when he gets home. As you might expect, he has more contact with his parents than I do."

"I'll remember to ask him." Kevin said simply, then added, seemingly as an afterthought, "After all the years of watching over Evan and his mother, it feels wrong to me not to know where he is and what he's doing."

"We all knew that it would be a difficult adjustment for you, but Duncan's keeping you busy, isn't he?" Dodger asked as he arrived at the seating area and motioned for his two companions to take seats.

"Oh sure. I just can't help but miss Evan. He's almost like my own son." Kevin quietly answered.

"Can I get either of you a drink?" Dodger asked as he walked to a mini fridge.

"A coke, if you have one." Kevin immediately answered.

Although Agent Roberts was thirsty, he was wary of accepting food or drinks from a stranger, especially after what had happened earlier in the day.

"No. Thank you." Agent Roberts said quietly.

"Let me know if you get thirsty." Dodger said easily as he popped the top off a coke bottle, then placed it on the coffee table in front of Kevin.

Agent Roberts nodded that he would.

"So, tell me, what brings you here this evening?" Dodger asked curiously as he took his seat.

"I was promised some answers." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"From what Lane told me, he thought that we could explain things to Agent Roberts so that he could be at peace with how we're resolving things. Then, when we're sure that everything's going to be okay, you could suppress his memories without causing him lasting mental damage." Kevin carefully explained.

"Lane seems to have an almost instinctive understanding of how the thrall interacts with the Brightsider psyche. I'll trust him to know what he's talking about." Dodger said thoughtfully to Kevin, then looked to Agent Roberts and said, "You may have to wait for Rafe for some of your answers, but I'll be happy to tell you what I can."

"So Kevin and I are what you call Brightsiders, have I got that part right?" Agent Roberts asked to confirm.

"Kevin is a Behilflicher, so while he may *technically* be thought of as a Brightsider, we tend to think of him in a class all his own. He's trusted without reservation, so generally when we're discussing anything that has to do with Brightsiders, we're not necessarily talking about him."

"Okay. I think I understand that." Agent Roberts said slowly, then continued, "But you, Dr. Killian, Lane and Duran are all Shadesiders, right?"

"Again, it depends on how you look at it. From one perspective, we could all be looked at as Shadesiders, but if you want to get technical about it, I'm probably the only *true* Shadesider in the group."

"How is that?" Kevin asked with interest.

"Well, Duran and Lane are both Dhamphirs, sometimes called daywalkers. That was kind of a parting gift from Evan, right before he left."

"I'm sorry, but I don't understand." Agent Roberts said honestly.

"It's a long story. Suffice it to say that Evan has the ability to go out into full sunlight. Before he left with Rafe's parents, he passed his ability on to Lane and Duran. I'm not exactly sure what his motivation was for doing that, but they've become invaluable to us, being able to handle things outside the house during the daylight hours." Dodger carefully explained.

"Without their help, I would have been trying to track down and capture Devin all on my own today." Kevin interjected.

"What about Dr. Killian? I saw him at the hospital today. Is he a Dhamphir too?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"No. He's a Shadesider, but he can also be thought of as a Pure Blood. He was never a Brightsider. He was born with the transformative." Dodger carefully explained.

"Does he have some kind of special powers because of it?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"It's hard to say what's caused by him being a Pure Blood and what's just because he's so much older than the rest of us. As far as I know, the only thing that's different about him is that he'll presumably be able to father a child. The rest of us are sterile in that sense of the word. For us to reproduce, we have to pass on our transformative to Brightsiders and turn them."

"If your relationship to Dr. Killian is what I think it is, I can't see that his fertility is going to be of much use." Agent Roberts said frankly.

"Well, practice makes perfect." Dodger said with a grin, then continued more seriously, "Even if he were in a straight relationship, the chances of his wife becoming pregnant would be astronomically low. It's just that way with Shadesider women."

A mechanical sound drew Agent Roberts' attention and he turned in time to see the elevator doors open.

"Welcome home." Dodger said with a smile as he stood.

Agent Roberts and Kevin also stood as Dr. Killian walked across the room to join them.

"How is he?" Dr. Killian asked as he looked at Devin with concern.

"We've just gotten him settled in and given him some juice. Lane's been taking good care of him." Dodger said as he wrapped Dr. Killian in a hug.

"Agent Roberts, what a surprise to see you here." Dr. Killian said before returning Dodger's hug firmly.

"I doubt that you're more surprised than I am."

Dr. Killian finished his hug, then released Dodger before asking, "What's changed so that we've invited the FBI over this evening?"

"You'd have to ask Lane to be sure, but the way I understood his reasoning was that if Agent Roberts can see for himself and know without a doubt that Devin's going to be alright, then we can enthrall him and erase his memory of this entire evening and it shouldn't do any damage to him." Dodger said carefully.

"One of these days Lane's going to need to learn that people sometimes have to endure hardships and traumas. Overcoming things like that makes them stronger." Dr. Killian said frankly, then gave a weary sigh before continuing, "But I suppose that since Agent Roberts is already here that we might as well continue with Lane's plan."

"Dr. Killian." Agent Roberts said to draw his attention, "When you drew my blood, did you actually test it for anything, or did you go through all of that just to see if I'd been bitten?"

"Actually, I ran the entire battery of tests, just like I said that I would. They didn't reveal anything to be concerned about, so I forwarded the results to your office... as per your request."

"Thank you." Agent Roberts said cautiously, feeling as though Dr. Killian had somehow evaded his question.

"Well, if you're here to see for yourself what's going to happen to Devin, then I suppose that we'd better get started."

"What are you going to do?"

"First I'll draw some blood and take a good look at that. I have everything I need upstairs in my office. I'll have to wait to decide what to do next until after I've seen what we're dealing with."

"He's a werewolf. What more do you need to know?" Duran asked frankly.

Although the question was asked without sounding derogatory in nature, Agent Roberts still felt that Duran might have been able to find a way to ask more politely.

"I'm going to do my best to determine if anything I'm thinking of doing to treat Devin might cause more harm than good." Dr. Killian answered simply.

"What if you can't find a treatment for him?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it." Dr. Killian said gravely.

Agent Roberts didn't want to imagine what that might mean.

"Lane, why don't you and Duran do your best to relax Devin while I'm gathering what I need to draw his blood. If you run into any trouble, have Dodger help you." Dr. Killian suggested with renewed motivation.

"Are you sure that you don't want Dodger to try first? He's the strongest with the thrall." Lane asked uncertainly.

"Dodger has the most raw power, but I think that you just about equal him in control. See what you can do." Dr. Killian said decisively.

Lane seemed anxious, but Agent Roberts could also detect the slightest hint of pride that Dr. Killian thought so highly of his ability.

"You'll want to see this." Kevin said from Agent Roberts' side.

"See what?"

"How they use their powers. Not many Brightsiders get to see this."

"If you'll remember, the plan is for me to have my memory wiped out when this is all over."

"Plans can change. Just watch." Kevin said as he focused on what Lane and Duran were doing.

* * * * *

Agent Roberts watched, but wasn't quite sure of what he was supposed to be seeing.

"Here it comes." Kevin whispered.

It took a moment, but then Agent Roberts saw a ghostly golden aura begin to surround Lane. At the same time, to a lesser degree, a similar aura of white began to envelop Duran.

Both young men appeared to be standing silently, but Agent Roberts could feel their calming influence wash over him as though it were a tangible thing.

As the seconds passed, Agent Roberts was suddenly aware of the auras taking on boundaries and forming into recognizable shapes.

"They're wings." Agent Roberts gasped when he realized what he was seeing.

"And halos." Kevin said with a tranquil smile.

Agent Roberts shifted his gaze slightly and saw exactly what Kevin was talking about.

"That's right boys. Just keep soothing him like that. If you can keep him calm long enough, maybe I can get him cleaned up a little." Dodger said before hurrying away.

Agent Roberts finally tore his gaze away from Lane and Duran so that he could get a look at how Devin was doing.

The fangs seemed to have receded as had the claws.

Although the boy's hair was still a wild mess, it didn't look 'unnatural', just messy.

All in all, Devin was once again recognizable as being himself.

Beyond that, Devin seemed to have calmed down to a point where he was able to look around curiously. He didn't look like a frantic trapped animal as much as a curious animal in unfamiliar surroundings.

* * * * *

When Dodger returned, he had a bucket with some soapy water and a few towels.

"Would you like some help with that?" Kevin offered.

"I would appreciate the help, but I think it's still too dangerous for either of you to get near Devin. One little 'nip' and we'll have a whole new set of problems on our hands." Dodger said as he moved close to Devin and was careful not to make any sudden moves.

"*That's right. Dodger's just going to clean you up.*" Lane said in a soothing voice as he maintained his focus on Devin.

It was only then that Agent Roberts realized that Lane and Duran hadn't been speaking the whole time.

"They don't need to talk to enthrall you?" Agent Roberts asked in a whisper.

"No. In fact, they don't even need words to command you. They can compel you to do something without you ever knowing that they did it." Kevin confirmed.

"With a power like that, they could command and control whole cities and governments." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"Shadesiders typically don't like to involve themselves in Brightsider matters any more than they have to. There are a few who work in government offices and other places of power for the good of the whole Shadeside community. But most are content to live their lives and do the things that they enjoy, contributing to the community each in their own way."

"So Dr. Killian researches the transformative. Lane and Duran do things in the daylight that other Shadesiders can't do. What does Dodger do?" Agent Roberts asked curiously.

"When someone gets turned, it's a delicate and dangerous time. Dodger is one of the people who helps people go through transition. From what I understand, the physical danger is secondary to the emotional toll it can take."

"I don't understand." Agent Roberts quietly admitted.

"The transformative is like a disease. When it's introduced to a new organism, there's no telling how it's going to react. Some people die. Other people lose their humanity and it becomes a contest for survival. Being forced to kill someone that you've sworn to help... that's a kind of hurt that doesn't go away."

* * * * *

"How's he doing?" Dr. Killian gently asked as he stepped off the elevator, carrying a black leather case.

"Lane did a good job of calming him. I think he's right where he needs to be." Dodger said seriously.

"Be ready to knock him out, if this agitates him too badly." Dr. Killian warned.

"I'll be ready." Dodger said quietly.

Agent Roberts could tell that, much like Lane, Dodger didn't want to take the chance of hurting Devin.

"Shhh. I'll be done in just a minute." Dr. Killian crooned as he swabbed Devin's arm.

"*It'll be okay. We're all here to help you. You're in a safe place.*" Duran assured Devin quietly.

From Devin's expression, it was obvious that he didn't comprehend their spoken words, but their quiet tones seemed to add to the soothing quality of the 'thrall' that both Duran and Lane were still projecting.

"Almost..." Dr. Killian whispered as he worked quickly and efficiently.

"Almost..." He said again as he waited for the large vial of blood to finish filling.

"That's got it. You did a great job, Devin. What a brave strong boy." Dr. Killian said soothingly as he worked.

"I'd give him a lollipop, but I doubt that he'd be able to manage something like that." Dodger said warmly.

"Now that he's had a few minutes, do you think he could have some more juice?" Duran asked uncertainly.

"Yes. I think that's a very good idea. No matter what happens next, he's probably going to need his strength."

"I'm going to get to work on this blood sample." Dr. Killian said as he gathered his things.

"Do you want me to let you know when dinner is ready or leave you alone?"

"Let me know, but don't get your feelings hurt if I'm in the middle of something and can't put it down right away."

"Don't worry. I understand." Dodger said tenderly.

"Make sure you don't leave Devin unattended. If he were to get frightened, he might end up hurting himself trying to get loose."

"Don't worry. Lane will see that Devin has everything he needs." Dodger said with a grin in his direction.

Lane rolled his eyes, but didn't disagree.

Dr. Killian leaned in and gave Dodger a quick kiss before hurrying toward the elevator.

"Agent Roberts, I'm going upstairs to make dinner. You can go with me if you like, or you can stay down here with Lane and Duran, if you would rather." Dodger said simply, not revealing if he had any preference in the matter.

"If I'm understanding what I'm seeing here, nothing more is probably going to happen until Dr. Killian is done with his tests." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"Likely not." Dodger agreed.

"I'll stay down here with Lane and Duran, in case they need my help for something." Kevin announced.

"Thanks Kevin. We really appreciate not only that you're willing to help us out, but also that you go above and beyond to do more than we'd ever ask of you." Dodger said sincerely.

"It's what I do." Kevin muttered shyly at the praise.

"Before you can think otherwise, you're invited for dinner." Dodger said simply, then started walking toward the elevator.

Agent Roberts glanced around the room, to assure him that there was no compelling reason for him to stay, then hurried to catch up to Dodger.

* * * * *

"So, Agent Roberts, now that we have some time alone, are there any questions that I can answer for you?" Dodger asked as he walked to the refrigerator.

"I don't know if there's a point to me asking questions, since the plan is for me to have my memories wiped out when everything is resolved."

"Since you've been with us, has Duran mentioned his father to you?" Dodger asked as he carried some vegetables to the sink.

"No. I don't think so." Agent Roberts said slowly as he tried to recall.

"My brother Duncan came to live with us, with me and Rafe, about... I guess it was over forty years ago now. It was a difficult decision, but we decided to tell him everything."

"If he couldn't handle it, couldn't you just wipe out his memory, like you're planning to do to me?"

"We could *try*. When you're dealing with the human mind, things don't always work the way you want them to. Sometimes compulsions break. Sometimes commands are misinterpreted. And sometimes it's like the thing Lane is so worried about, an artificial flaw introduced into a mind can grow and fracture and end up causing deep lifelong damage to a person."

"So, are you saying that you didn't wipe his mind?" Agent Roberts asked slowly.

"To the Brightside world, Duncan's just a delivery driver, but to the entire Shadeside community, he's the 'go-to' guy for just about anything you need done in the world of daylight. He took the fact that he was privy to some forbidden knowledge and found a way to capitalize on it. As it turns out, the whole Shadeside community is better off for it."

"Is this your way of asking if I'll use my FBI resources to help you?" Agent Roberts asked suspiciously.

"No. Not precisely. This is more my way of asking you that if you encounter a Shadesider in the course of your duties, that you at least *consider* their situation, rather than putting them in a position where you know that they'll be severely injured or discovered." Dodger said carefully as he steadfastly kept his focus on chopping vegetables.

"You want to protect your people. I can respect that." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"This world we're living in, it's changing so quickly that it's all we can do to keep up with it. Somehow Morgan has been able to arrange things so that we've been able to update our identities when we need to, but it's only a matter of time before he's discovered or some technology comes along that we're not able to circumvent."

"What will you do then?"

"I don't know. I think that it's impossible to know until we see the situation we're in when that time comes. The best we can do is prepare ourselves as much as we can and hope that it's enough."

"I still don't know if you're my friend or my enemy."

"I don't know that either, but what I *can* tell you is that I don't hate you or want to see you come to harm. I don't know if that helps, but maybe it's a start."

"I don't hate you either. I'm afraid of you, but I don't hate you."

Dodger smiled at the frank admission, then said, "I'm afraid of you too, for different reasons."

"Afraid of me? Why?"

"Well, there's the obvious. You could shoot me with that gun you've been keeping cleverly concealed. But beyond that, whether your memory is hidden from you or not, you'll still have the capability of summoning forces that we're unable to stand against. It is fully within your power to destroy our entire way of life."

"I really wish that I could tell you I wouldn't do something like that, but just like with the scenario you described, I can't predict what I'll do at some future time because I don't know who I'll be defending from whom."

"How about we agree that we won't intentionally hurt each other without a compelling reason to do so?" Dodger asked as he looked away from his cutting board.

"I think I can get onboard with that." Agent Roberts finally conceded.

"Good. It may not be 'friendship' in the strictest sense of the word, but maybe we can use it as a foundation."

"I'm sure that there have been very good friendships that have started out with a lot less." Agent Roberts said honestly, then thought to ask, "Do you need some help with that?"

"I wouldn't mind it if you took the packages of meat out of the bottom of the fridge and set them by the stove."

"I can do that."

* * * * *

"Dr. Killian? Dodger asked me to tell you that dinner will be ready in a few minutes. He said that with the boys downstairs, that he's going to serve it at the kitchen table." Agent Roberts said from Rafe's study doorway.

"Come in, Agent Roberts. I'd like for you to see this." Rafe said as he rolled his office chair away from his desk.

Agent Roberts walked slowly into the room, then around the edge of the desk where he could see the computer screens.

"You'll have to tell me what I'm looking at."

"The first screen is a sample of Devin's blood."

"Okay. I've seen quite a few blood samples during my time at the academy and none of them ever looked like this."

"I'm still waiting on a few more tests, but from what I'm seeing here, I'm guessing that Devin has a disorder which causes his body to be unable to produce a particular enzyme which aids in digestion. That, in turn, impacts his entire body, making him malnourished in a very specific way."

"I didn't see any signs of him being malnourished in his pictures. A little underweight maybe, but that's not uncommon for a fifteen year old. With all the starts and stops in growth, they tend to be a little gawky and angular."

"True. I'm sure the malnourishment would have manifested later in his adult years, when his body had reached a point where it couldn't compensate for it any longer."

"Okay. I think I understand that, but what does it have to do with what I'm seeing here?"

"The blood sample that you're looking at is Devin's blood *since* he's been introduced to the transformative agent. To say that it mutated is an understatement. It seems that the transformative must need that particular enzyme or its resulting secretions to properly replicate and overtake the organism."

"So it's not working in him like it works in you?"

"Correct. When the transformative encountered his enzyme deficient blood, it attempted to adapt its replicative strategy and found a way to overtake Devin's entire body with an altered form of itself."

"So that's why he's a werewolf instead of a vampire... shadesider... you know what I mean."

"Yes. I do. And you're right."

"Okay. I think I get the gist of that, but what do you have on the second monitor?"

"That's a little experiment that I did, introducing an updated version of the transformative to Devin's already infected blood."

"It's like a crime scene photo on the cellular level. All the cells have been torn to shreds."

"You're very good at interpreting these. Yes. It's as you said, all the cells have been destroyed. The old 'mutated' transformative and the new version of the transformative were incompatible and in their haste to try and assimilate each other, they destroyed the host cells in the process."

"Which means that if you gave that stuff to Devin, he would die within a few hours."

"I'd estimate eight to ten hours of pure hell."

"Please tell me that this last screen holds some good news."

"I don't know about that yet, but it holds hope."

"I'll take it. What are we looking at?"

"I gave Devin's blood sample some very specific... let's call it a vitamin shot. I did my best to replace what was missing from Devin's cells before he was transformed."

"Okay. So you gave his anemic cells a boost. Is that what this is?"

"No. After giving them the boost, I once again introduced the new transformative into the mix. At least on a cellular level, they seem to have undone much of the damage caused by the 'mutant' transformative."

"So all you have to do is give Devin a vitamin shot and then that super duper transformative stuff and he'll be alright?"

"You know nothing's ever that easy."

"Yes, I *do* know that. I was being sarcastic."

"I thought so." Rafe said wearily, then continued, "Devin doesn't need a vitamin shot, he needs an extensive course of therapy. It's going to take time for his cells to absorb enough of the essential nutrients for this to have a chance of working. And we've got to be very careful, because we'll only have one shot at this. If we give him the new transformative too early... you remember that hellish death we were talking about? That."

"Are you guys going to come and eat or not?" Dodger asked from the doorway.

"We're on our way." Rafe immediately answered.

"How long do you think the treatment will take?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Weeks... Months, maybe. We'll just have to keep monitoring his cellular viability and absorption rates."

"So I guess having him back to normal and ready to leave with me in the morning is a little too much to ask."

"That's *never* going to happen. Whether he ends up being a werewolf, a dhampir or something we've never encountered before, the one thing that's certain is that he can never go back to his old life."

Chapter 24

"Aren't the boys going to eat with us?" Dr. Killian asked as he entered the kitchen.

"I thought it would be best to take them their meals downstairs, so that they can stay and watch over Devin." Dodger said simply as he gave his husband a quick hug.

"Be sure that you send enough for Devin to have some too. Juice doesn't take the place of food and the last thing Devin needs is to starve."

"Don't worry. There's plenty."

"What's going to happen to Devin?" Agent Roberts asked as he took his seat.

"It's too early to say. But whatever happens, we'll make sure that he has the best possible quality of life." Dr. Killian promised.

"What's going to happen to me?" Agent Roberts asked more quietly.

"Our priority is the protection of the Shadeside community. If we can achieve that goal without causing you harm, of course we'll do that." Dr. Killian answered simply.

"Is that a threat?"

"No. That's a fact." Dr. Killian stated impassively, then continued, "If you'll be willing to work with us, I'm sure that we'll be able to come to some sort of an understanding."

"He's already told me that he'll do what he can to protect Shadesiders that he encounters in the course of his duties." Dodger quickly interjected.

"Before I agree to anything, I'd like a little better idea of what my 'help' will entail, in practical terms."

"If you're interviewing a witness who happens to be a Shadesider, arrange to speak to them at a time and place where there's less of a chance of them being endangered or found out." Dr. Killian suggested.

"So you're not asking me to look the other way or to hide what might end up being relevant evidence because a suspect is a Shadesider?"

"No. But I'm asking that you look at the situation as a thinking, feeling person with inside knowledge, rather than as a 'by-the-book' agent. Make the decision that will allow you to look at yourself in the mirror and see a decent person in the morning."

"What happens if I have a Shadesider in custody and can't do anything to help them?"

"In a case such as that, you can call me." Dr. Killian said simply, then explained, "In extreme emergencies, there are people that I can call upon for help, but I can't compromise them by giving you their names."

Agent Roberts slowly nodded that he understood.

"By the same token, I won't give them your name, either. There might come a situation where I might have cause to pass some sensitive information to you, but I wouldn't put anyone in contact with you without discussing it with you first."

"You're talking like I've already agreed to something." Agent Roberts said in a warning tone, then said more firmly, "I haven't."

"I understand that. We're just telling you how things *could* be. You haven't committed to anything." Dr. Killian explained.

"Agent Roberts, you have inside knowledge that the people who make and enforce the laws don't have access to. That gives you a unique opportunity to do something good and make a real difference." Dodger urged him to understand.

After a moment to process that, Agent Roberts quietly said, "I'm still not agreeing to anything, but maybe if you told me some more specifics about what happened to Devin, it might make it more clear to me how my help might be needed."

"We don't know everything, but I'll tell you what we've been able to come up with." Rafe said carefully.

Agent Roberts took another bite of his food as he waited.

"A Darksider named LeGrue had an unhealthy fascination with Devin. I have no idea if LeGrue was his real name or a pseudonym that he adopted after he was turned. I suppose it doesn't matter now.

"From what I've been told, LeGrue was 'turned' in Connecticut, so it seems likely that he knew Devin, or knew of him, in his former life there. Regardless, after he was turned, he came to Columbus with the Darksider who 'made' him. By the spotty accounts that I've been told, LeGrue couldn't get past his obsession with Devin and one night he disappeared.

"About a month later, he arrived in Columbus with Devin. It wasn't clear if Devin had been turned at that point because LeGrue was very possessive of him and wouldn't let others get near him.

"When the Darksider community found out that he had kidnapped Devin, they gave him an ultimatum. Give up the boy or leave their community.

"He left.

"That's when they sent a message through the grapevine to us, letting us know to be on the lookout for LeGrue. They called for a blood hunt. Although the Darksiders stand in direct opposition to just about everything we stand for, we have a common desire not to be found out. LeGrue's actions had the potential to draw attention to us and endanger both our communities.

"This morning the Darksiders sent word that they had eliminated LeGrue, but they weren't able to locate his 'childe' due to the impending daylight. They know that we have Brightsiders who help us during the day, so they warned us to be on the lookout for Devin and told us that he was probably hiding in the park."

"I assume that if they had gotten to Devin first, they would have killed him." Agent Roberts said slowly.

"Yes. Eventually. But I'm sure they would have engaged in some sort of depraved 'entertainment' with him first. It's their way."

"What I don't get is why would LeGrue kidnap Devin in the first place? Is it just so that he could bite him and turn him to be a companion?"

"No. Darksiders aren't typically worried too much about companionship. It's more likely that LeGrue lusted after Devin in his Brightsider life and when he lost his humanity, he became obsessed with Devin for purely sexual reasons."

"That's it? He went through all that just for a sexual thrill? What a depraved monster!"

"Most Darksiders are. But as long as they restrict their activities and stay within certain boundaries, we overlook their transgressions as much as we can. It's a tenuous balance that we've achieved, but it mostly works."

"So to keep that peace, the Darksiders let you know what was going on?"

"That's the way it was presented to me, but they do what they do for their own reasons. I won't make the mistake of ever fully trusting them."

"So now that you have Devin, the Darksiders are pretty much out of the picture?"

"Probably. There's always a chance that they might demand to have Devin returned to them, claiming that he's theirs, since he was 'made' by one of them. But they know as well as we do that we won't give him back. If they decide to take that path, it would just be to stir things up... probably for a lack of anything more interesting to do."

"So he's staying with you. What happens to him next?"

"We'll do what we can to get him stronger and start him on his vitamin therapy. Once he's ready, we'll introduce the advanced transformative and... hope for the best. No one's ever attempted anything like what I'm planning. There is literally no way of knowing what will happen to him."

"Would it be better to leave him the way he is?"

"That is *not* an option." Dr. Killian said firmly, then explained, "Left as he is, Devin would have no meaningful life to speak of. If we can bring him back to any level of human consciousness, even if it's that of a young child, it would be better than leaving him as an animal."

"I'm glad that you have a clear idea of what's the right thing to do for him because I don't think I could keep from second guessing myself in a similar situation."

"I've had centuries to contemplate what it's like to exist without any concept of decency or good. That's where Devin is now. He's a 'thing'. He's no longer a person by any meaningful definition of the word. I'm going to do everything in my power to restore his ability to function as a person. I don't know if it will be possible to restore who he was, but if not, then we'll start anew with him and teach him how to love and be loved and participate in the world as a person who can make a difference."

"I hope that you're able to do that. I think that after what he's been through, he deserves that much."

"I don't know about that. I'm wary of wishing that anyone get what they 'deserve', but essentially what I want to give Devin is a chance at life."

"What do you think I can do to help you with that?"

"Well, when you go back to your job they're going to be expecting a report about what you found out about Devin. It's my hope that you will find a way to put them off his trail... maybe permanently."

"That's going to be difficult without a body."

"I know. The next best thing I can think of is if you report that you didn't find anything. Maybe you could report that you found his 'nest' but he either wasn't there or he escaped."

"As detail oriented as the bureau is, it might be difficult to fabricate a report. But when you think about it, even a half-assed lie has got to work a lot better than the truth in this case. There's no way that anyone would believe it."

"It doesn't hurt that there has been a recent resurgence in the popularity of vampires... especially the sparkly ones."

Dodger groaned and visibly cringed at the mention of them.

Dr. Killian laughed at his reaction and Agent Roberts couldn't help but smile a little.

"Thanks to those types of movies, the suggestion of *actual* vampires is looked upon as nothing but fantasy."

"The thing is, if I tell them that I found Devin's 'nest', I don't see how it's going to help us."

"It won't help *us*. It will help *you*." Dr. Killian said seriously, then explained, "If you can show them the location where Devin was taken with evidence that he had been there, then it will verify that you have been doing something productive with your time. Although you weren't able to rescue Devin from his captor, you at least picked up his trail and tracked him to his hiding place."

"And the assumption will be made that since they knew that I had discovered them, that they moved to another place... which we will mysteriously not be able to find."

"While it's not the ideal situation, realistically, I think it's the best we can come up with under the circumstances."

"I would feel a whole lot better about it if we could provide some kind of resolution for his poor family. They must be worried sick about him." Agent Roberts said thoughtfully.

"Well, short of finding a child to kill in his place, then mangling the corpse beyond all possible recognition or identification, I can't think of any way we can definitively close the case." Dr. Killian said frankly.

"You wouldn't do that, would you?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"I've had occasion to do many things to protect myself or my community that you would look upon as being 'evil'. Sometimes you get backed into a corner and there's no easy way out. Choices have to be made, whether you like them or not. But to answer your question, I have not, nor would I, sacrifice one child for the benefit of another."

"That's good to know. But I still feel that there should be something more that we can do for Devin's family. If we leave things like they are, they might continue on for years or decades, always expecting Devin to appear on their doorstep at any moment."

"Maybe you should talk to Lane and Duran about this. They have more recent experience with this sort of thing and might be able to come up with some ideas that we haven't." Dodger interjected.

"I don't understand. How do you mean?"

"Duran and Lane both turned fairly recently. They've both chosen to withdraw from their families slowly, over a period of time..."

"Why?"

"Because we don't age like Brightsiders do. The longer we have contact with them, the more apparent it becomes that we're not aging. For Shadesiders who have families that they're close to, there is sometimes the option to take the opportunity to build up a nice collection of memories before they finally have to break away completely."

"What does that have to do with Devin?"

"I don't know. Maybe nothing. But Lane and Duran have turned more recently and have had contact with their families. I think that gives them a completely different perspective."

"I've learned to trust in Dodger's instincts about such things. If he thinks that you should talk to the boys, I suggest you do it."

Agent Roberts looked down at his plate and realized that he had already finished his meal.

The food had been good, but that was not the thing at the forefront of his mind at that moment.

"Should I go downstairs and talk to them now?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously, in case there were some other business that they needed to discuss first.

"Hold on for a minute and I'll make up plates for them. You can take them down with you." Dodger said simply.

"I still have a few more tests that I need to run." Dr. Killian explained, then looked to Agent Roberts and said, "I won't be doing anything particularly sensitive at this stage of things, so please feel free to stop in if you have any questions for me or if you come to any decisions."

"I will. Thank you." Agent Roberts said sincerely, then watched as Dr. Killian left.

"It's a shame that it took Devin's tragedy to bring you out here. It kind of automatically puts us on opposite sides of things. I would really rather that it wasn't that way." Dodger said as he placed four empty plates on the table before him.

"It's looking more and more like I'm going to be on your side, at least in some things."

"We'll do our best to make you not regret that. I promise that we do as much as we can to make sure that things turn out for the best for as many of the people involved as possible."

"I believe that you do. But sometimes there just isn't a right answer. You end up having to choose from the least wrong ones."

"Yes. I suppose that *is* what we're doing, isn't it?"

"I just wish that there were more that we could do for Devin. It kills me that he's had his life taken away from him before he ever really had a chance to live it."

"I would like to give you some assurance about that, but all I have to offer is a glimmer of hope. No one knows more about the transformative than Rafe. If there's a way to restore Devin, he'll find it."

"And if there isn't?"

"Then there isn't. At a certain point we sometimes have to accept that certain things *aren't* possible. If it comes to that, we'll do what we have to do to give Devin the best quality of life that we can."

"This sucks."

"Yeah. Tell me about it." Dodger wearily chuckled as he started loading the filled plates onto a serving cart.

Agent Roberts watched and was about to offer to help when he realized that he'd just be in the way.

"Would you mind taking this down to the boys? I need to clear up after dinner."

"Will you come down when you're finished?"

"Probably."

* * * * *

When Agent Roberts stepped off the elevator, he noticed the aura of peace that radiated throughout the room.

"Thanks. I was starting to get really hungry." Lane said with a smile.

"He's always hungry." Duran said with a loving grin at his husband.

"How are things going down here?" Agent Roberts asked as he brought the serving cart nearer.

"We've been able to get Devin calmed down and cleaned up. I think that's pretty good, considering how he was when he first got here." Duran answered for the group.

Agent Roberts looked at Devin and could once again see him as a lost boy instead of as an insane animal.

"Do you think Devin will be able to eat something?" Lane asked curiously as he took one of the plates of food, then sat cross legged on the floor.

"Well, Dodger must think so, because he made a plate for him." Duran answered with a smile as he also took a plate.

"How are things going upstairs? What did we miss?" Lane asked curiously between bites of food.

"Just some talk... Actually, Dodger suggested that I ask you guys about something."

"What's that?"

"Well, nothing's for sure yet. I haven't agreed to anything. But it's been suggested that when I write my report that I tell them that I found Devin's hideout in the park, but say that he was long gone by the time I got there. The thing is, that leaves the door open for him to return. That gives his family hope that he'll be found... Dr. Killian says that that can never happen."

"If I'm understanding it right, even in the *best* best case scenario, Devin being able to have contact with his family is still a remote possibility." Duran said thoughtfully.

"Yeah. So Dodger suggested that maybe you two could help me come up with something that might be able to give them some closure. It kills me to think of them having Thanksgiving and looking at his empty place at the table or Christmas with presents for him waiting under the tree." Agent Roberts tried to explain.

"Why does this bother you so much?" Duran asked curiously.

"I guess because of my younger sister Shelly. All of this made me think about how it would affect her if something like this happened to me. I wouldn't want for her to have to go through the pain of grieving over losing me, but I also wouldn't want her to be saddled with the unrealistic hope that I might return someday." Agent Roberts said carefully.

"So you're trying to come up with something that you can put into your report that will give them a reason to accept Devin's loss without providing a body as evidence." Lane asked cautiously.

"Yes. That would be nice."

"If they want to believe that Devin's alive, they will. *Nothing* you can do will change that. All that stuff you imagined about Thanksgiving and Christmas, it could all happen. In fact, it *needs* to happen. With any luck, they will eventually accept it and move on with their lives." Duran said seriously.

"Yeah. And if Rafe *does* pull off some kind of miracle and is able to completely restore Devin to like he was before, then you haven't closed the door on his old life." Lane added.

Kevin nodded slowly, then said, "Keep your story simple and straight to the point. If you need for me to back you up on anything, just let me know so I won't contradict you."

"I entered the park, did some investigating, stumbled onto a trail which led me to the place where Devin had been living. He was already gone when I got there and I didn't see or hear anything." Agent Roberts said cautiously.

"If you can get back to the scene where we fought Devin, there might be some evidence that he had been there." Duran said thoughtfully.

"There might also be evidence that *you* had been there." Agent Roberts reminded him.

"You said something about a 'nest' didn't you?"

"Yes. It just stands to reason that Devin and his captor would have a base of operations of some sort." Agent Roberts said reasonably.

"The clearing where we caught Devin was nothing like that. It's possible that there's another place where he actually *did* live for a while." Kevin said thoughtfully, then quickly added, "I can call Bruce and see if he's come across anything like that."

"Bruce?"

"He works for Rafe. As soon as the sun went down, he took a team to investigate the park, to make sure that LeGrue or Devin haven't turned anyone else that we hadn't heard about yet or left any evidence about who and what they are." Kevin explained as he took out his cell phone and dialed.

Before Agent Roberts could respond, Kevin was walking away with a cellphone pressed firmly to his ear.

"It sounds like you may be going back to the park tonight. If you do that, you need to know that the park is considered neutral territory for Darksiders and Shadesiders." Duran said seriously.

"Yeah. In the middle of downtown it's a place where those with animal instincts can run free and prowl for a while." Lane added.

"Do you do that?" Agent Roberts asked curiously, having difficulty imagining such a thing.

"Not at the park. Here at Rafe's house we can just step into the back yard and we have all the wilderness we need." Lane responded with a smile.

"Besides, I think we look at the park as being part of our 'job'. Since we can go out in daylight, we walk the park once every day or so to see if there's anyone there who accidentally got stranded in the daylight or anything like that."

"Does that happen a lot?"

"No. Not a lot, but it happens."

"We actually helped a stranded Darksider once. *That* was awkward." Lane said with a smile at the memory.

"But what we were saying is that while the Shadesiders and Darksiders all recognize the park as being a neutral zone where we won't fight each other, you're a Brightsider... our prey. In other words, it's still

possible that there might be weak-willed or weak-minded individuals who will attack you. If you go back to the park, make sure not to go off on your own." Duran said firmly.

"Is that why the homeless avoid the park?" Agent Roberts asked cautiously.

"Well, duh!" Lane said with a roll of his eyes.

"There's no disputing a well-reasoned argument like that." Duran said with a loving grin at his husband."

"Agent Roberts, are you ready to go?" Kevin asked as he walked back to the group with purpose.

"To the park?"

"Bruce has already run across the 'nest'. I'll drive you over there so we can be sure that there's nothing to incriminate anyone else or evidence about the transformative. If you're planning to use the nest as evidence in your report, we need to get over there quickly."

"I'm just about ready. I just want to go upstairs and tell Dr. Killian something before we go."

"That's on our way. Come on."

* * * * *

"Did you tell Rafe that you're going to help us?" Kevin asked as they pulled away from Dr. Killian's house.

"I told him that I would evaluate each situation on a case by case basis and make my decisions accordingly. I didn't agree to be an 'operative' of the Shadeside, but I won't go out of my way to cause them harm."

"I'm sure he appreciates that. Every time they expose themselves to a Brightsider they put their entire community in danger."

"Given what little I know of them now, I don't know if I'd even recognize a Shadesider if I encountered one in my daily life."

"You probably wouldn't. They go out of their way to hide their difference from Brightsiders. But in that circumstance, it doesn't really matter if you know about them or not. It's usually only in an emergency situation that it's an issue."

"I suppose not."

"It's sometimes possible to spot Shadesiders if you know what to look for. The most obvious thing is their aversion to direct sunlight or harsh lighting. They are also susceptible to loud noises and strong odors. None of those things 'proves' that someone's a Shadesider, but once you suspect, you can be on the lookout for more signs."

"I wonder how many Shadesiders I've come across and never noticed that anything was off about them."

"Probably not very many. They're very careful about controlling their numbers. That's one reason that the Darksiders were so upset with LeGrue. He made a 'childe' without permission. One instance of that wouldn't necessarily cause a problem, but if he got away with it without any consequences, that would be like putting out a message to the whole Darkside community that the Brightsider buffet is open for them to enjoy."

"So the Darksiders *do* have some sort of rule of law?"

"Yes. It's fairly straightforward and savage; the minimum to protect their society."

"Speaking of savage, what's up with Lane and Dodger? One minute they're like best friends, the next they're being rude and insulting to each other."

"It took me a while to figure that one out too. But as far as I can tell, it has a lot to do with how Lane can accept affection... something to do with his mother. If Dodger was openly and unreservedly affectionate toward Lane, it wouldn't feel genuine to him. In Lane's mind, he has to *earn* it for it to be real."

"That's pretty messed up."

"Shadesiders are people too. They have hangups and baggage just like anyone else."

"But they also have longer to work things out."

"True. But just because someone has the time, doesn't mean they'll do anything with it."

"Duran doesn't seem to have any issues."

"I think he still has some growing up to do, but I haven't noticed him having any issues beyond that. Duran tends to be a lot more socially comfortable than Lane. Although I think that Lane is a lot more level headed in a crisis."

"You seem to know them pretty well."

"We see a lot of each other. We all work for Duran's father... well, we *actually* work for the entire Shadeside community, but Duncan signs our paychecks."

"Right, because direct sunlight doesn't bother them..."

"It still bothers them to some degree, but not nearly as badly as it does the others." Kevin corrected simply, then quickly said, "We're almost there. As soon as we arrive, Bruce is going to take us to the site. While we're doing that, his people are going to be working on clearing everyone out of the park, so there won't be any issues when you call in the police and the FBI."

"Do you think that they disturbed the site? Because if they did, that might raise some questions."

"You can ask Bruce about that when we get there. I'm sure that he probably did his best to preserve the site for you."

"So once we're at the scene, everyone's going to leave?"

"We'll have to see where it's located. Most likely we'll leave you at the nearest park entrance where it's relatively safe so that you can conduct your people to the scene on your own."

"That sounds like a good way to go."

"I'm glad, because we're here."

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts, this is Bruce, he works for Rafe."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." Agent Roberts said as he offered his hand to the tall, ruggedly attractive man.

Bruce looked at the hand, then at Kevin uncertainly.

"We haven't had time to fill him in on everything yet." Kevin said simply.

After another moment of hesitation, Bruce took hold of the offered hand and shook it firmly.

"Your hand is freezing!" Agent Roberts exclaimed with surprise.

"Shadesiders have lower body temperatures than Brightsiders." Kevin explained simply.

"We should get moving. I've already given the word for our people to pull out."

Agent Roberts and Kevin followed along as Bruce led their way.

* * * * *

The cross country trek was less stressful than the one earlier. They traveled at a reasonable pace and sometimes took a less direct route that was easier to traverse.

"Do you think that you'll be able to find your way back here on your own or would you like for me to stay with you to help?"

"I don't know how we'd explain your presence."

"I'm sure that we could come up with something reasonable, but I'd rather not have to talk to the authorities if you can handle it on your own."

"I think that I'll be able to manage."

"Good. It's just up ahead." Bruce announced.

Agent Roberts took a moment to quickly scan around with his flashlight before continuing on.

* * * * *

"The first thing you notice when you enter this clearing is the animal carcases, but I think the more interesting thing is the ripped up clothes over there. Devin probably ripped them off when he was in transition." Bruce said as he gestured around.

"I'm curious to know what explanation the Brightsiders will be able to come up with for that, since they won't consider anything to do with vampires or werewolves." Kevin said honestly.

"Has Rafe been able to confirm that Devin *is* a werewolf?" Bruce asked cautiously.

"Yeah. He seemed to be pretty sure about it." Kevin said gravely.

"Does he know if it's a new variant of the transformative?"

Kevin seemed to be at a loss for how to respond, so Agent Roberts said, "He thinks it's something to do with Devin's biology, some sort of nutritional deficiency. He never mentioned anything about the transformative in Devin being different from anyone else's except to mention how it had changed itself to adapt to Devin's unique biology."

"Good. The last thing we need is *another* form of the transformative going around." Bruce said with relief.

"Agent Roberts is concerned that when he brings his investigators in, that there might be some evidence that someone other than Devin and LeGrue had been here. Have you noticed anything like that?" Kevin asked cautiously.

"I already thought of that. We've done our best not to touch anything here. I think the scene is as pristine as you could want. I asked Cherish and Bellamy to do a careful sweep of the area where you captured Devin, there shouldn't be anything left there to incriminate anyone when they're done."

"Those are the people who helped Lane and Duran catch Devin." Kevin said to Agent Roberts in a low voice.

"So, is there anything else that you need to do before I call in the reinforcements?" Agent Roberts asked Bruce carefully.

"Not that I can think of. My people should be mostly gone by now and the last of them will be out of here before your reinforcements arrive."

"All that's left is to go back to the park entrance and set everything into motion." Kevin quietly added.

Agent Roberts scanned around the gruesome clearing one last time with his flashlight before indicating that he was ready to go.

* * * * *

"I don't know how you did it Rookie. But it looks like you found what you were looking for." Agent Simmons said as he looked around the 'nest'.

"What I was looking for was Devin, alive and well. So no, I didn't. But hopefully this is a step in the right direction."

"Are you sure you didn't see or hear anyone else while you were out here?"

"No. I just followed what looked to be a recent path through the woods. I didn't come across anyone else."

"Well, these are the clothes that the boy was wearing, or what's left of them." Agent Simmons said as he pointed, then continued, "And it looks like we've found the missing pets... good call on that one, by the way. There's no doubt that they were taken for food."

"Since you have more experience with things like this, maybe you can tell me, what are we supposed to be doing right now? With the investigators on the scene, I just feel like I'm in the way."

Agent Simmons laughed, then with an evil glint in his eye he responded, "Now we write reports."

* * * * *

"Agent Roberts?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Senior Agent Medville, director of this office."

"I'm sorry that I didn't get a chance to meet you before. I was called out on a mission as soon as I arrived. We just got back."

"Yeah. Well, you're not going to get a chance to meet me now, either. You're being transferred out."

"What?"

"You'll be expected to report for duty in two days. Here are your new orders."

"I didn't request a transfer. They can't just relocate me without notice."

"Actually, if you'll read the fine print of your employment contract, you'll find that they can." Agent Medville said frankly, then added, "You'd better clear out your desk and start packing. Two days."

Agent Roberts watched in astonishment as Agent Medville walked out of the room.

"Do you think that this has anything to do with your report for the Devin Barnes case being classified and closed so suddenly?"

"I know that they don't have to explain their reasoning to me but I'd really like to know what that's all about. I mean, there wasn't *anything* of a sensitive nature in that report. And we didn't even find Devin or his kidnapper. Honestly, I still have no idea what it is that I'm supposed to know that I'm not allowed to talk about."

"Welcome to the bureau." Agent Simmons said with a weary chuckle, then asked, "Where are they transferring you to, anyway?"

"Waxell, Kentucky."

Part 7: Once in a Blue Moon

Chapter 25

"How's he doing?" Dodger asked as Rafe walked into the room.

"I think that the examination might have disturbed him. You may need to be a little extra gentle with him until he's calmed down."

"I will, but that's not what I was asking. How is Devin doing as far as being ready for you to try the treatment on him?" Dodger asked firmly.

"I'll have to check his latest bloodwork to be sure, but I think he's achieved the best, most nutritionally rich state that he's going to be able to. His body just naturally rejects certain nutrients. There's nothing else I can do to compensate for that."

"Do you still think the treatment will help him?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"I just don't know. It's so close that I can't predict if it will provide any benefit for him." Rafe said gravely.

"But you still don't think it will hurt him?" Dodger asked to be sure.

"Unless something completely unexpected happens, he's already as damaged as he's going to get. I can't be sure that this is going to help him in any measurable way, but I'm reasonably certain that it won't make matters worse."

"When do you want to do it?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Soon. But if possible, I'd like to wait until Lane and Duran are back. Not only would it be better to have more people to help us, just in case there's an adverse physical reaction, but they've also formed an emotional attachment to Devin. It seems right that they should be included in what could be an important event in his life."

"Have you heard anything about when we can expect them back?"

"Not precisely. From what little I know of it, they could be done already. However it goes, I'm reasonably certain that they'll be back before this weekend."

"So, is that when you want to do it?" Dodger asked speculatively.

"Possibly. We'll just have to wait and see what situation Lane and Duran are in when they return. We may have to deal with something of theirs before we can turn our full attention to Devin."

"Do you think that Shawn's going to make a habit of calling us for help?" Dodger hesitantly asked.

"I doubt it. From what little I know of it, Shawn was backed into a corner and if he couldn't get Lane and Duran's help, then some drastic things were going to happen to some undeserving people. I think that if he could have found any way to handle it without us, he would have."

"That *does* sound more like him. I just worry that someone who finds out about us is going to start depending on us to solve all their problems for them."

"I think that between the thrall and our sheer ferocity that we should be able to encourage someone to regard us as a last resort for help." Rafe said frankly.

"Don't underestimate stupid people who feel entitled. Their minds don't fold the same as normal people. Their subconsciouses can justify all kinds of insane things and they can subvert even your most straightforward commands." Dodger said grimly.

"You're more knowledgeable on that subject than I am. I've always assumed that people were basically the same. Of course there were some variations due to wealth and privilege, or lack thereof, but at the core I've always seen the essence of human minds being the same. The way you talk about it, society is actually changing the way the human mind functions." Rafe said slowly.

"I know it seems like kind of an 'out there' theory, but Leila and I have both been monitoring the progression over the course of decades. Not only is the phenomenon observable and repeatable, but it's also accelerating. It may not be long before the thrall becomes too dangerous and unpredictable to use." Dodger said gravely.

The sound of the phone ringing stopped any further exploration of the subject.

Dodger picked up the phone and calmly answered, "Killian residence, this is Dodger."

After a few seconds, Dodger smiled as he said, "What a coincidence. We were just talking..."

A look of concern overtook his expression, then he placed a hand over the mouthpiece as he quietly said, "Leila wants to talk to you. It sounds important."

Rafe accepted the phone from Dodger and cautiously asked, "What's wrong, Leila?"

Dodger watched and waited anxiously as Rafe listened without expression.

"I'll have to talk to Dodger about it." Rafe finally said.

Dodger waited to be asked a question, but instead Rafe continued, "Yes. I remember what I promised, but things have changed since then. I'm not saying 'no', I'm only saying that I need to talk to Dodger about it first."

There was a long silent moment as Dodger puzzled over what Rafe might be talking about.

"If that's what you think is best." Rafe said quietly, then hung up the phone.

"Ask me what?" Dodger immediately asked.

"It would probably be better if I told you a little of the story that led to the events of today.

"Ask me what?" Dodger demanded.

"I'm pretty sure you'd be more comfortable if I took the time to build up to it."

"Ask me what?"

"If you would object to me impregnating Leila so that she can bear our child." Rafe said simply.

Dodger stared wide-eyed for a moment and eventually realized that his jaw had gone slack.

"A long time ago..." Rafe began to say, but was interrupted.

"You and she are both 'born' shadesiders. The two of you are the absolute best chance to produce fertile shadesider offspring." Dodger stated seriously.

"Well, yeah." Rafe reluctantly agreed, then added, "Apparently, she's ovulating."

"How soon do you need my answer?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"The sooner the better. She's on her way here." Rafe said frankly.

"Okay. Just give me a few minutes. I need to make a call." Dodger said emotionlessly before getting up and taking the handset of the phone with him.

"Do what you need to do." Rafe said anxiously as he watched his husband hurry away.

* * * * *

"Have you reached any decisions?" Rafe asked cautiously, not able to even guess at Dodger's mood from his lack of expression.

"Yeah." Dodger reluctantly responded.

"So, what have you decided?" Rafe finally asked.

"Rafe, in the end, this is something that is between you and Leila. It's really rare and important and if you want to do it, you should." Dodger quietly responded.

Rafe slowly nodded his acceptance of the verdict.

Before he could think of what to say next, Dodger quietly continued, "But I'm about to ask something that maybe I don't have a right to."

"You can ask me anything."

"If you and Leila have a child, what relation will that child be to me?"

"I suppose, like most relationships on the Shadeside, that it will be whatever we decide it is."

Dodger slowly nodded.

"What would you like for it to be?" Rafe asked curiously.

"I want to be one of the baby's parents."

"I see no problem with that."

"But do you think Leila would mind? I mean, since I'm not the one who's going to..."

"I know that Leila won't mind at all. But we'll ask her just to be sure." Rafe said peacefully. "Besides, you're my husband, so it makes perfect sense that you would be one of the parents."

"I feel so selfish asking."

"Dodger, you're wonderful. You would have every right to feel jealous or resentful for me even asking. But the only thing you can think of is that you want to be sure that you'll be considered a father to our child." Rafe said lovingly.

"I love you. Of course I want to share this with you." Dodger said, clearly astonished that Rafe would think otherwise.

"Do you want to be there for the conception? I'm sure Leila wouldn't mind." Rafe asked hesitantly.

"Um, no. But thanks for offering." Dodger said as he fought to hide his discomfort at the thought.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. And I'm also sure that I could never look Leila in the eyes again if I saw her... muffin."

Rafe chuckled, then said, "The whole time I'm doing it, I'll be thinking of you."

"I'll be thinking of you, too."

* * * * *

A knock on the door finally broke the silence that had fallen between them.

As much as he didn't want to, Dodger disentangled himself from Rafe to allow him to answer the door.

"I'll get something together for us to snack on." Dodger said quietly before hurrying into the kitchen.

Rafe looked after him with concern, as he dutifully made his way to the front door.

* * * * *

When the door opened, Rafe was left speechless.

"Is Dodger alright?"

"Yes. He's in the kitchen. Please, come in." Rafe stammered.

"We decided to come over so that we could stay with Dodger and help keep his mind off things while you're... otherwise occupied."

"Have a seat and I'll let Dodger know that you're here." Rafe said as he motioned toward the living room seating area.

"Did you get a new living room set?"

"Yeah. A month or so ago." Rafe said distractedly, then added, "Make yourselves comfortable and I'll be right back."

* * * * *

"Ernie and Blake are here. Apparently they want to be here to help you deal with..." Rafe trailed off, not entirely sure how to describe the act he was intending to perform.

"...the love of my life being intimate with someone else?" Dodger suggested as he turned to look at Rafe inquiringly.

"If you don't want me to, I can just say 'no'." Rafe immediately responded.

"No. I agree that none of us want for you and Leila to miss out on this opportunity. You might never get another one. But I think that having Ernie and Blake here to keep me company through it might make it a little easier. Not only are they some of the smartest people I know, but I couldn't ask for better friends." Dodger finished with a smile.

"They're waiting in the living room. I'll carry that in when it's finished." Rafe assured him.

"I love you." Dodger whispered, then gave Rafe a quick but ernest kiss before hurrying away.

* * * * *

Rafe silently contemplated what he was about to do as he waited for the coffee to finish brewing.

He took down one more cup and saucer and added them to the tray as he considered the path that he was about to embark upon.

When the last little gurgle and hiss indicated that the coffee maker was finished, Rafe took the insulated carafe and added it to the serving tray.

* * * * *

"Rafe, do you think that Devin is up to having visitors yet?" Dodger asked as Rafe carried the tray into the living room.

"I think that as long as you're there he should be fine. He especially likes you and you have exceptional control with the thrall." Rafe said as he placed the tray on the coffee table.

Before he could begin serving, there was another knock on the door.

"Go ahead. I'll take care of this." Dodger assured him.

Rafe gave Dodger one last appraising look to gauge his sincerity before going to answer the front door.

* * * * *

"How are you? Is everything alright?" Rafe asked with concern.

"What did Dodger say? Are you willing to go through with it?" Leila asked quickly.

"Yes. Dodger understands what a rare and precious opportunity this is." Rafe assured her.

"I hope you realize just how rare and precious *he* is. I have some idea of how much he loves you. No matter what he's telling you, I know that this has to be tearing him apart." Leila said honestly.

"I know that on some level it is, but he's got Ernie and Blake here to help keep him from dwelling on things. I think he's handling it better than I would have imagined." Rafe said honestly.

"Then, if you have no objection, we could get right to it. I mean, there's no way of knowing just how long we have." Leila said honestly.

"Yes. I understand that. But before we begin, I just wanted to be sure that we agree on what our expectations are... assuming that everything goes to plan." Rafe said carefully.

"I've been thinking about that too. Before you start, let me go ahead and tell you what I've been thinking. Maybe it will make what you were going to say a little easier." Leila suggested.

"I'm all for that. Go ahead."

"I was thinking that if everything works the way that we hope and I end up having a girl, then we could give her *my* last name and she would live with me. Of course you can do weekends and vacations and all of that whenever you like, but in essence she would end up being *my* daughter for whom I make the decisions." Leila said seriously.

Rafe slowly nodded his understanding as he processed what she was saying.

"Okay. Now this is only if you agree, but I was thinking that if it's a boy, then we could do the same thing, only with you. He could have *your* last name and you could raise him according to your culture and values and beliefs." Leila continued.

"When I asked Dodger, he made a point of asking if he could be considered to be one of the child's parents. While I doubt that he'll want to give the child his last name, what with it being mostly unpronounceable, whether it's a boy or a girl he's going to want to play a significant role in the child's life."

"I think that Dodger will be a wonderful parent. I'll make a point of letting him know that no matter how things end up going, he'll be as much a parent as any of us." Leila said passionately.

"I'm glad you think so." Rafe said sincerely, then added a little more gently, "Let's go make Dodger a daddy."

* * * * *

"You might want to hang back for a minute while I calm him down. He gets excited when we have visitors." Dodger said as the elevator started down.

"I'm still not sure that I'm clear about his situation." Ernie said honestly.

"When Devin came into contact with the transformative he didn't change in any of the typical ways. Instead, he turned feral. Due to him gaining spontaneously growing body hair and his fangs dropping when he's agitated, Rafe believes that what he is, might have been classified as a werewolf." Dodger explained as the doors opened.

The sound of soft whimpering cries caused Dodger to launch himself out of the elevator at top speed.

"Devin? What's wrong boy?" Dodger asked as he hurried across the room to the mattresses and pillows that Devin had been using as a bed.

Ernie and Blake shared a look with each other, then silently decided to remain in the elevator until Dodger had a chance to assess the situation.

"What's a matter boy? What's wrong?" Dodger gently asked as he knelt at the crying boy's side.

As soon as Devin noticed Dodger's presence, he scrambled around so that his head was in Dodger's lap.

"Guys, he's okay! You can come in!" Dodger called as he shifted himself to sit on one of the mattresses.

"What's wrong with him?" Blake asked with quiet concern.

"I think he's missing Lane and Duran." Dodger said as he gently petted the teenage werewolf to soothe him.

"Didn't you say something about Rafe finding a cure for him?" Ernie asked cautiously.

"So far he's come up with one possible treatment. He has no way of knowing how much it will help Devin, or if it will help him at all. But he doesn't have anything else to try."

"If that's the case, then there's no good reason to hesitate, is there?" Blake asked cautiously.

"Rafe theorizes that the reason this happened to Devin at all is because of some nutritional or enzymatic deficiency that Devin naturally has. Since Devin’s been living with us, Rafe's been working to help Devin recover from his malnutrition. That's what's been keeping him from trying the treatment up to now."

"Does that mean that Rafe's going to be ready to try the treatment soon?" Ernie asked cautiously.

"We'd like for Lane and Duran to be here to support Devin through it. If everything goes to plan, we'll probably do it this weekend." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"Will Rafe's other situation... the thing with Leila, will that have any effect on your timetable?"

"I can't imagine why it would, but I suppose that it's possible." Dodger said honestly.

"What's going to happen to Devin if the treatment doesn't work?" Blake asked hesitantly.

"I suppose we'll keep him here with us." Dodger said uncertainly.

"Is that really fair to *him*?" Ernie asked hesitantly.

"What else would you propose?"

"Listen, I'm not telling you what you should do with him, but you need to consider whether or not you honestly believe if it's more merciful to keep him as he is, or relieve him of the burden of living without living." Ernie answered reluctantly.

"Are you saying that you think we should put him down?" Dodger asked as he slowly rubbed the wild boy's shoulder.

"No. Not exactly. I'm just saying that you should take his quality of life into account in your decision making." Ernie said regretfully.

"Who do you think has the right to make a decision like that for someone else?"

"You do. You and Rafe and anyone else who might be willing to devote the next few centuries of your lives to caring for someone who can't care for himself on any level. But I don't see it as a right. I see it as an unfortunate responsibility that someone is going to have to take on. I guess that you won't have to decide it today, but you'll have to face up to it sooner or later." Ernie said frankly.

"Do you think being like this is hurting him?" Dodger asked quietly as he gently stroked Devin's hair.

The boy's eyes were drifting closed with the combination of gentle touches and gentle words.

"I honestly don't know." Ernie answered, then explained, "I don't see any evidence of consciousness in him. He doesn't appear to have a 'soul'."

"Neither do you, at least, not at the moment." Blake told his brother frankly.

Ernie smiled at his twin, obviously not taking the harsh words to heart.

After a long moment of stroking the boy's unkempt hair, Dodger finally said, "I don't care what condition he's in after the treatment, I'll make sure that he has a life worth living."

"Good." Ernie said sincerely.

Dodger looked at him strangely for his apparent change of heart.

"I didn't want you to do anything to hurt Devin, I just wanted for you to be sure, deep down, about what you were doing before you committed to it." Ernie explained.

"Yeah. Thanks for getting me to think it through. I guess that I'm just too close to the situation to be able to see all sides of it like that." Dodger said honestly.

"That's what you've got us around for." Blake said with a smile.

"Besides, I don't get to be the 'evil twin' very often. Manna keeps me on my best behavior." Ernie said with a smile that was the mirror opposite of his brother's.

"Where is Manna? I'm surprised you didn't bring her with you." Dodger asked curiously.

"She's in... Montreal?" Ernie answered uncertainly, then looked to his brother for confirmation.

"Anchorage, I think. She's been working with some people to set up an event at a resort in the arctic circle for the 'thirty days of night'." Blake said slowly.

"The last time we talked to her, it sounded like she wasn't going to be able to pull it all together, but she's still got a few more things to try."

"If there's any way to make it happen, I'm sure that she'll find it." Dodger said warmly.

"She's nothing if not tenacious." Blake chuckled.

Ernie nodded his wholehearted agreement.

"I appreciate that you're here helping to keep my mind off what's going on upstairs." Dodger said quietly.

"How's it working?" Ernie cautiously asked.

"There's no way that I'm going to be able to forget what Rafe's doing, but I appreciate the distraction. It really *is* helping." Dodger said gratefully.

"Would one of you mind getting two juice bags out of the mini-fridge? Devin has me pinned down." Dodger asked, obviously not at all bothered by the fact.

"Yeah. I'll get it." Blake immediately answered.

"Thanks." Dodger called after him as he went.

"If everything goes well with Devin's treatment, what condition do you expect him to be in?" Ernie asked seriously.

"According to Rafe, he'll never go back to being who he *was*. That person is gone forever. I suppose the best that we could hope for would be that Devin ends up being a mostly normal teenage boy with a somewhat foggy past." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"It's locked." Blake called from across the room.

"The combination is thirty-three twelve." Dodger called back.

"If he's never going to be Devin again, you might consider changing his name before doing the treatment."

"Why is that?" Dodger asked curiously.

At the sound of the mini-fridge opening, Devin scrambled to get up, then ran across the expansive room to the small lounge area where the mini-fridge was located.

"If you give him a bag of juice he won't jump on you." Dodger quickly called.

"You could've warned me!" Blake said as he rushed to get a juice bag before the young werewolf tackled him.

Dodger and Ernie chuckled as they watched Blake scrambling as Devin approached.

"Good boy! That's right Devin. Be nice! Good boy!" Dodger called across the room as Devin accepted the juice bag from Blake without molesting him.

After a moment to be sure that Blake wasn't going to get jumped, Ernie quietly asked, "Isn't Devin listed as a missing person?"

"Missing and presumed dead, I think." Dodger cautiously answered.

"Calling him by his real name is just another way that his past might come back to haunt you." Ernie said gravely.

"I suppose that's true." Dodger reluctantly agreed.

"Do you know if his family is still looking for him?"

"I don't know. Possibly."

"And as far as they know, Columbus was the last place that he was spotted, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then you might want to seriously consider altering his appearance, just in case his family wants to blanket the area with his picture."

"I guess that I've been putting off doing anything like that because I was still hoping that things would somehow work out that Devin could be restored to his former self."

"And maybe he still could. The treatment is a big unknown. All I'm saying is that you need to consider what you're going to do if Devin *isn't* restored. Whatever level of functioning he ends up with, I'm pretty sure that it's going to be easier for him having the new name from the beginning, rather than having to relearn it at some point after the fact."

"How are you doing over there Blake?" Dodger called across the room.

"We're doing fine. He's my buddy. Aren't you? You're a good boy." Blake said warmly as he watched the young werewolf slurp his juice.

"He can have another one if he still seems hungry. It'll be a while before he gets his dinner." Dodger said seriously.

"I'm not sure..." Blake began to say when Devin suddenly sprang up and started running toward the back of the room.

Recognizing Blake's look of question, Dodger told him, "That's where we keep Devin's sandbox... you know, his toilet."

"Oh. Well, I guess he must be finished with his juice then." Blake said uncertainly as he started back across the room to where Ernie and Dodger were talking.

"I was just telling Dodger that it might be a good idea to retire Devin's old name and work on making a new identity for him." Ernie said frankly.

"Between the ever present danger of Darksiders and the possibility of Devin accidentally wandering away, having a new brightsider identity set up for him could end up being the difference between losing him and getting him back if something unfortunate were to happen." Blake said soberly.

"I hadn't thought of it that way, but that's a really good point. I guess that when Rafe gives Devin the treatment I'll call Morgan and get things started." Dodger said thoughtfully.

Blake and Ernie shared a significant look, then Ernie quietly said, "I know it's not really my place to say so, but even with Morgan's help, doing anything 'official' takes forever. Waiting until the last minute is *never* a good idea."

"I thought you were going to say that it's a good way for Dodger to distract himself from what's going on upstairs." Blake said frankly.

"Yeah, there's that too." Ernie agreed.

"I suppose that since there's no possible way that Devin will be returning to his family or using his former identity, that talking to Morgan about creating a new identity wouldn't hurt anything." Dodger said slowly.

"Right now?" Ernie asked cautiously.

"Why do you care so much?" Dodger asked curiously.

"I don't, really. I just think that this is something that you can do to improve Devin's situation as well as help distract you." Ernie said honestly.

"Even so, I think you're right. This probably *is* something that really needs to be done. Actually, I probably should have thought of it earlier." Dodger finished thoughtfully.

"It's no good focusing on that. Right now, just think about what's going to be best for Devin in the long term." Ernie said frankly.

"I wish Lane and Duran were here. They're supposed to be responsible for Devin, *they* should be the ones here making life decisions for him and taking action on his behalf." Dodger said sourly.

"Why aren't they? I mean, where are they?" Blake asked curiously.

"They got called out of town for a few days on some important business. I can't really talk about it." Dodger finished apologetically.

"Well, it seems to me that it might be for the best that they are. This gives you the chance to step up and be the 'older and wiser' person in their lives who can take responsibility and do what needs to be done. If you play your cards right, they'll never have to know that you had a moment of indecision about what was the right thing to do for Devin. As far as they'll ever know, you just naturally took the next step that needed to be taken." Ernie quietly explained.

Dodger seemed to be thinking about that, then smiled as Devin brushed up against him, strategically positioning his head under Dodger's hand.

"Okay. Yeah. I like the sound of that." Dodger finally admitted as he began gently petting Devin's mop of hair.

"We can stay down here with Devin if you need to make a call." Ernie quietly offered.

"Yeah. I guess I should. If you look over by the mattresses you should be able to find some knotted rope. He loves to play 'tug'." Dodger finished with a smile.

"Sounds like fun. We'll keep him entertained while you take care of business."

* * * * *

"Claudia? It's Dodger. I was just wondering if Morgan might have a few minutes to talk to me about something." Dodger asked into the phone.

"Oh? Yeah. I guess so. Do you already know about what's going on with Devin?"

"Yeah. He's a werewolf. From what Rafe said, there are other types of werewolves in the world that have nothing to do with us, but it's just the most descriptive and universally understood term to use to describe his condition."

"He's fine." Dodger said shortly, then continued, "The reason I called is to find out what we'll have to do to get Devin's identity changed."

"Well, 'officially' Devin is listed as a missing person. Although I think he's presumed dead, he still exists on the books and there might be a way that they can trace the person we have with us back to his former identity."

"No. We don't have a new history in mind for him. As soon as we thought about it I called you so that we could get the process started. I really don't know what needs to be done and I can imagine that some of it could take time."

"Um, okay, let me think. I know they told it to me..." Dodger said slowly.

After a moment to consider, he finally continued, "Devin Matthew Barnes, I'm pretty sure that's it."

"Fifteen. Although I'd say that he could probably pass for older if he needed to."

"Oh? I didn't realize that you could look someone up that quickly... that's kind of scary." Dodger said honestly, then quickly added, "Before you try to change anything, remember that the FBI was involved in this."

"Good. I didn't want to take a chance of you or Morgan getting in trouble." Dodger responded with relief.

"Honestly, whatever's easiest for you. I don't see any reason that he should have to be legally related to Rafe or me... I mean, maybe it's possible that after he's had his treatment he might have some concept of family and want to feel like he's a part of ours, but even so, I think it's as likely as not that he'll end up forming a familial relationship with Lane and Duran instead of me and Rafe."

"Yeah... seventeen's fine."

"No. No preference."

"No. There's no reason that we would have to wait. You can put it into effect as soon as possible."

"Considering the way that he is, we need to make sure that it's noted that he's developmentally disabled or emotionally disturbed or something. That way, no matter how the treatment works on him, there's a way to explain his current state and also why he hasn't attended public school." Dodger said thoughtfully.

"Good. That'll work just fine. I just didn't want for him to have a reference to a grade school history that couldn't be substantiated."

"Okay, Claudia, it's really scary how fast and easy that was. If I didn't know better, I'd think that there might be scores of people in Columbus who aren't who and what they pretend to be." Dodger said with a smile.

"Right. Thanks for all the help. If you need anything else from me, you know where to find me. There's a possibility that we'll be in town after Devin's treatment, depending on his temperament."

"Right I need to get out of the habit of calling him that."

* * * * *

"How did it go?" Ernie asked as Dodger stepped off the elevator.

"It was easier than I would have imagined. As far as I know, everything is in the process of being taken care of."

"So Devin's new identity is all set up?" Blake asked with surprise.

"That's right. And I suppose that we should all get into the habit of calling him by his new name."

"What's that?" Ernie asked as he smiled at the teenage werewolf rolled onto his back, begging for belly rubs.

"From here on out we're going to call him Beau, which is short for Beauregard Jonathan Geisel."

Chapter 26

"You legally changed his name? We're never letting you babysit again!" Duran said as he struggled to give Devin, now known as Beau, all the attention and affection that he had missed out on during their absence.

"He won't ever go back to the way he was before and keeping his old identity was an unnecessary risk." Dodger said reasonably.

"I didn't expect him to be so happy to see us. Somehow I thought that he wouldn't remember who we were." Lane chuckled as he gently petted Beau's hair and worked to curb his enthusiasm.

"I don't know if he thinks of you as parents, siblings, or pack-mates, but I can tell you for sure that he missed you while you were gone." Dodger said with a smile at the tender scene before him.

"We found out one surprising thing while we were helping Shawn." Duran said in prelude, garnering a warning glance from Lane.

"Devin... I mean Beau isn't the only werewolf in the modern world. We actually met four others." Duran continued.

"Four werewolves? I wonder if Rafe knows about them. If they're stable, they might be able to help Rafe to help Beau." Dodger said speculatively.

"He probably *does* know about them, but the werewolves we met aren't the same as Devin... Beau, I mean. They're not Shadesiders, they're some kind of shapeshifters. From what little we could gather, it seems that they were made that way by a curse or something." Duran said uncertainly.

"We didn't ask for too many details. When they said that they were cursed, we just kind of accepted it... mostly due to the smell, I think." Lane added with a slight grimace at the memory.

"Yeah. They *smelled* cursed, that's for sure!" Duran vehemently confirmed.

"I've heard that there are other types of werewolves running around, but if there's even a chance that they could help Devin... I mean, Beau. Now you've got me doing it!" Dodger said with playful aggravation.

"In their human forms these werewolves are just regular people..."

"Except that they stink." Duran hurried to add.

"Right. But Shawn said that he couldn't smell anything different about them, so maybe it's just a Shadesider thing that we can sense and Brightsiders can't." Lane suggested.

"Anyway, when they're human looking, they can talk and think like normal people. But even when they're fully animal, they seem to remember who they are and who their friends are." Duran explained.

"That's the other thing, their change is complete. While... Beau... changes and becomes 'like' a wolf, these guys actually fully become wolves and dogs of all kinds." Lane said carefully.

"So they're more like what you think of when someone says 'werewolf'." Dodger said speculatively.

"Yeah, except that they aren't out of control. You can talk to them and they can understand you." Lane slowly explained.

"They can also stop when they're half-way changed. When they're like that, they're more like what you'd think of as a werewolf, but they can talk, too." Duran quickly added.

"Right And when they're like that, they're almost like Beau, I mean, in the way that they look." Lane said slowly.

"It sounds like you two had some kind of an adventure." Dodger said with a smile at the pair.

"When you stop and think about it, we didn't really do that much. But it was nice to be able to help out Shawn and see how he was doing. You wouldn't believe his house." Lane said with a grin.

"I *love* his breakfast room. Someday I want for us to have a place like that." Duran said firmly.

Dodger watched as Lane melted at the thought of someday owning a home with Duran.

"Shawn's doing alright then?" Dodger asked softly, not wanting to disrupt the tranquil mood that had even managed to calm Beau.

"Yeah. He's doing great. His boss seems to be okay. The town is a little creepy, you know, kind of in a Twilight Zone way, but everyone seems nice enough." Lane said as he absently continued to stroke Beau's hair.

"So what have we missed? Anything exciting going on around here?" Duran asked as he cuddled with Beau, who was joyfully soaking in the attention.

"You just missed Ernie and Blake. They stopped by and visited for a while. If you get called out on another job, you might think about asking them to babysit for you. They ended up getting along with Beau fairly well." Dodger said casually.

"I hadn't thought about them, but I could see them getting along." Lane said honestly.

"The only other news I can think of right now is that Leila's ovulating." Dodger said as he stood and started walking across the room, toward the refrigerator.

"Before I ask you how you know that, maybe you could tell me *why* that would be any of our business." Lane said cautiously.

"Leila and Rafe are both 'born' Shadesiders. We're assuming that means that a child of theirs would be fertile." Dodger said uncomfortably as he opened the lock on the mini-fridge.

"Okay. I actually didn't expect you to have an answer for that." Duran said honestly.

"I don't like where this is going." Lane said in a low voice of concern.

"Neither do I, but this isn't about what we like. This is about what's best for everyone." Dodger said more quietly.

"So... what? Are they at the hospital right now doing all kinds of mad science things to make her pregnant?" Duran asked awkwardly.

"You mean like a laser-guided turkey baster? No. They're upstairs in the guest room. As far as I know they will be doing it the old fashioned way." Dodger reluctantly admitted.

"If they've only got one chance, then that's probably best. I mean, it's probably got the best chance of working. The more scientific stuff you throw into the mix, the more chances there are for the technology to fail in some unexpected way. Remember how many Brightsider things don't work the way they're supposed to on Shadesiders." Lane cautioned.

"Why is this such a big deal, again? I think I missed that part." Duran asked cautiously.

Before Dodger could answer, Lane patiently explained, "This is a chance for Shadesiders to have a baby who was born naturally. It only happens a few times a century, so it's important to take advantage of the opportunity when it comes around."

As Dodger approached the group, he handed out sports bottles of drinks, including one for Beau.

"Thanks." Lane said with a quick smile.

As Lane took a drink, Dodger picked up the narrative, "'Born' Shadesiders are rare. From what I've heard, they're looked upon as being a son or daughter of the entire Shadeside community that they were born into."

"So Rafe's trying to have a kid with Leila? How does that make *you* feel?" Duran asked his uncle curiously.

"Logically, I understand the importance of it. Emotionally... it's not the best thing that's ever happened to me." Dodger said honestly.

"Yeah. I get that." Duran acknowledged as he gently petted Beau.

As Lane looked down at the young werewolf enjoying some juice, he quietly said, "It's important to know when to follow your head and when to follow your heart. Logic and passion are both great motivators, but they're lousy masters."

Dodger slowly nodded his agreement to the sentiment.

"How long do you think it's going to take?" Duran cautiously asked.

"Rafe didn't say... a few days, I guess." Dodger finished miserably.

"Days?" Lane asked with surprise.

Before Dodger could answer, Duran explained, "If she's got an egg in the chute, Rafe's got to take as many shots as he can at that little sucker before it gets away."

Despite the crudeness of the analogy Dodger reluctantly nodded his agreement.

"Oh, um, wow. I just kinda thought 'one and done', and he'd be outta there." Lane said frankly.

"In a perfect world, that's how it would work." Dodger wearily agreed.

"If they're going to be at it for days, they're probably going to need to take breaks and rest up between... sessions." Lane finished uncomfortably.

"I would hope so." Dodger said unenthusiastically.

"I know you probably don't feel like it, but maybe Duran and I could get them something, you know, make up a tray for them. That way you won't have to deal with it." Lane quietly suggested.

"Yeah. I can make them some endurance snacks and set up a few of these sports bottles of juice for them." Duran said quickly.

"Yeah. Like the way they have cups of water set up alongside the road for the marathon runners." Lane said enthusiastically.

Dodger reluctantly broke into a smile before cautiously saying, "It *would* be a way of showing our support."

"I don't know what kind of sexy snacks we can come up with, but we'll do what we can to make them stuff to keep up their energy and keep them in the right mood." Duran said with excitement at the prospect.

"It sounds like a good idea, but I think I'll stay down here with Beau while you two do that. Just let me know how things turn out." Dodger said with a slightly forced smile.

"Yeah. We won't be too long." Duran promised.

"Call if you need us for anything." Lane told Dodger gently before following Duran.

* * * * *

"Want some quesadillas?"

Dodger was broken out of his thoughts and looked at Duran inquisitively.

"We figured that while we were making them, that we'd make enough for everyone." Duran said frankly.

"I don't have much of an appetite." Dodger said quietly.

"I didn't really think that you would, but if you're not interested, Beau might be willing to help you with them." Duran said while suppressing a grin.

Dodger glanced at the young werewolf and saw wide hopeful begging eyes looking back at him.

"Give those here." Dodger said as he fought down a chuckle.

Duran was already handing him the plate as he said it.

"So, is Lane upstairs right now, giving Rafe and Leila their quesadillas?" Dodger asked quietly.

"No. We left a cart outside the bedroom door for them and knocked before hurrying away. Right now, Lane's driving over to the video store where he used to work, trying to get there before they close. He's hoping to get some 'inspirational' video tapes for Rafe and Leila." Duran explained as he sat on the sofa, the other end from Dodger.

After a moment to consider, Dodger reluctantly asked, "Video tapes? Do they even still make those? I can't imagine what kinds of things he's going to come up with."

"I know, right? But we figured that it really doesn't matter. There's no telling if any of that stuff will work to get them in the right mood, but whether it does or not, we can keep trying things to help them out until we run out of ideas or until they're done." Duran said purposefully.

"Thanks for helping me deal with this, Duran. As much as I like Lane and relate to him, you're my nephew. Nothing is quite the same as having family nearby when you really need someone." Dodger said seriously.

"But I haven't done anything." Duran protested.

"You're here. I just wanted you to know how important that is to me." Dodger said honestly.

After a moment to consider, Duran finally said, "Thanks. I can't say that I really understand, but if me being here helps you, then I'm glad to do it."

Both of them turned their attention to the hand that was sneaking over the edge of Dodger's plate.

"Of course you can have another one." Dodger said tenderly as he picked up another quesadilla wedge and handed it to Beau.

The boy snatched it up in his hands and made short work of the tasty treat.

"Has Rafe said anything about when Beau's going to be ready to try the cure thing that he's been working on?" Duran asked quietly.

"Actually, yes. From the way he was talking this morning... or I suppose it was yesterday morning now. Regardless, he's accomplished everything that he can with the nutritional therapy he's been using. He wanted for the two of you to be here to support Beau through the next phase of his treatment. No matter which way it ends up going, I know that Beau will appreciate you going through it with him." Dodger said seriously.

"There's a chance that it will kill him, isn't there?" Duran quietly asked.

"Yes, there's a considerable chance of that. But the alternative is to leave him like he is, unable to hunt or feed in the way his nature dictates. He would have to be on a leash, either figuratively or literally, for the rest of his life... which could easily end up being *centuries* long.

"He would need to have someone taking care of him *at all times*. He would *never* be in a position where he could take care of himself." Dodger said firmly.

"I guess this is less about what I want and more about what's best for him, huh?" Duran asked weakly.

"Welcome to adulthood." Dodger said wearily.

"I'm sixteen."

"Adulthood doesn't always wait for you to be ready." Dodger said frankly.

"I know. It's been right on my heels for a while now. I just didn't want to admit it." Duran said resignedly.

"Just do what's best for Beau. I can't say that you won't ever have regrets, but at least you'll have the peace of mind knowing that you made the best decision that you could, even if it ends up turning out badly." Dodger said gently.

"Those really are the only two choices, aren't they? Do it or don't." Duran asked quietly.

"As far as I know, yes. From the way Rafe explained it to me, the vitamin regimen has made Beau's cells susceptible to the daywalker variant of the transformative. Since the new transformative worked on you and Lane so well, it's reasonable to assume that it would work on Beau in much the same way. If he is exposed to it right now, while he's at the peak of his susceptibility, it has the best chance of undoing some of the worst aspects of the failed 'Werewolf' transformation." Dodger carefully explained.

"Does that mean that there's such a thing as a *successful* Werewolf transformation?" Duran asked curiously.

Dodger took another quesadilla wedge off the plate and handed it to Beau before answering, "I don't know if there's an answer to that. From one point of view, werewolves are failed vampires. But I suppose another way of looking at it might be that a werewolf who has adapted the transformative to work with their unique physiology might be seen as a new and unique creature who didn't exist before. That might be seen as a success by some interpretation of the definition."

Duran took a long slow look at Beau before quietly saying, "No matter how you look at it, *this* was not a success."

"Well, with any luck, before it's all over, Rafe will be able to turn it into one." Dodger said hopefully.

* * * * *

"Does anyone want to stay up and watch Godzilla movies tonight?" Lane asked as he walked down the stairs, carrying a plastic shopping bag of DVDs.

"The one with that 'Malcolm in the Middle' guy in it?" Duran asked curiously.

"No. Any Godzilla movie made after 1979 doesn't count. All they do is substitute flashy special effects and jump-cut editing to try and make up for the lack of an actual story told with heart." Lane said firmly.

"You can count me in. I haven't watched them in years and I wouldn't mind watching them again." Dodger said honestly.

"I'll bring the laptop down so we can spend time with Beau while we're watching it. Considering what Rafe is about to do, we need to make as many good memories as we can." Duran said as he fought to keep the tears from forming in his eyes.

"So he's ready to do it?" Lane asked anxiously.

"Yes. At least, as soon as he's done with... other things... he will be." Dodger finished with an artificial smile.

"Maybe if I can learn more about how to work with the thrall, I can find some way to reach his mind." Lane said desperately.

"Leila and I have already taught you more than most Shadesiders will ever know about the thrall. If there were any chance of us being able to help Beau that way, either you or I would have sensed it before now and pursued it." Dodger said firmly, not leaving any room for misunderstanding.

"I guess you're right. I just don't want to do something that might end up hurting him even worse." Lane said honestly.

"Don't kid yourself, Lane. There's no 'right' answer here. We're choosing between one horrible thing and another. Just... try to cause as little pain as possible." Dodger finished in a defeated tone.

"Lane, why don't you go get the laptop while I make us some movie snacks?" Duran asked simply.

After a moment to consider, Lane finally said, "Yeah. Let's enjoy what we have while we still have it."

* * * * *

"I love your nachos." Lane said before stuffing another into his mouth.

"See Uncle Dodger? It's all about what I can do for him and not about me as a person." Duran mock pouted.

"I'm pretty sure Lane was saying that your overloaded nachos is '*one of the things*' he loves about you, not the only thing." Dodger playfully explained.

Since Lane's mouth was otherwise occupied, he simply pointed at Dodger and nodded his agreement.

"Oh, okay." Duran finally relented, then added, "I guess that's alright then."

Once Lane had swallowed, he quietly said, "Shawn called Duran an overly-sensitive little prick."

Dodger laughed, then asked, "Any particular reason or was he just making an observation?"

"I was testing him to see how he'd react when he was pushed." Duran said seriously, more seriously than Dodger would have expected.

"How'd he do?" Dodger asked curiously.

"He was able to turn it around on me and call me out on my bullshit without escalating the situation. It was a good solid reaction."

"It's important to know who you've got at your back when you're stepping into something unknown." Lane said in support of Duran's actions.

"Well, good. It's nice to know that Shawn is level-headed under pressure." Dodger said frankly.

"Yeah. I'm glad he's on our side." Lane said honestly.

"He *has been* on our side. That doesn't mean that he will be the next time we have to deal with something involving him. He has his own people and own reasons for doing things. He's a good man, worthy of respect, but good men can end up on either side of a conflict for any number of reasons." Dodger explained seriously.

"So far we've landed on the same side of things, but that doesn't mean that we always will." Duran said speculatively.

"Right. I can imagine all kinds of scenarios where his job would put him in a position at odds with us." Dodger confirmed.

"It's going to take some time for me to get used to thinking that way. I'm kinda used to thinking of people as 'friends' or 'enemies'." Lane said honestly.

"Black and white thinking like that leaves you vulnerable to manipulation. If you trust people blindly, you might end up getting some bad advice or being sabotaged in some other way." Dodger carefully explained.

"But you don't have to feel like there's no one that you can trust." Duran interjected, then continued, "I don't trust people to begin with, so I can watch your back."

"We can all watch out for each other." Dodger added.

"Do you guys mind if I restart the movie?" Lane asked hopefully, then explained, "We were talking and I missed most of it."

"Yeah, go ahead." Duran said easily.

"All the same to me." Dodger said honestly.

Beau didn't appear to have an opinion, being perfectly content between his two favorite people in the world.

Lane restarted the movie and resumed his munching as the Godzilla movie marathon continued on.

* * * * *

"I was wondering where everyone was."

Lane, Beau and Duran were asleep in an impossible pile on one end of the couch. Dodger looked up from his place at the other end and quietly asked, "Are you done for the night?"

"We did what we needed to. I seriously doubt that doing more would significantly improve the chances of impregnation." Rafe said seriously as he slowly approached the couch.

"So you're done?" Dodger cautiously asked to verify.

"Yes. We've done everything that we're going to do." Rafe confirmed.

"Is Leila still here?" Dodger cautiously asked.

"No. She left a few minutes ago." Rafe assured him, then continued, "Remind me to thank Lane and Duran for the snacks and... *inspirational* materials. Their care package gave us a much needed laugh at a particularly somber point in our proceedings."

"Somber?" Dodger cautiously asked.

"We were doing what needed to be done, but both of us could feel the wrongness of it. We agreed that no matter what happens with the pregnancy, that we're going to give each other a little space until the memory of it can have a chance to fade a little." Rafe said quietly.

"Will she let us know if she's pregnant or not?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"If she finds out that she is, I can't imagine that she could keep from sharing the joyous news. If she determines conclusively that she isn't... She'll probably ask Portia or Lily to pass the news on to us." Rafe finished quietly.

Dodger nodded, then glanced at the other end of the couch at the pile of sleeping boys snuggled into a heap of absolute comfort. Finally Dodger cautiously asked, "Do you think I should wake them up so that they can go to bed?"

"Leave them be. If they're kinked up in the morning, it will sort itself out before too long." Rafe said quietly.

"When do you want to do Beau's treatment?" Dodger cautiously asked.

"Beau?"

"Yeah. We officially changed Devin's name. It seemed like a good idea to distance him from that part of his life."

"That's probably best." Rafe granted, then continued, "We can do it later this morning or early afternoon, once everyone's awake and ready to commit several hours to one project."

"What do you think the chances are that Beau's going to be alright?" Dodger asked with concern.

"As far as I know, nothing like this has been done before. Not intentionally, anyway. Seeing Lane and Duran accept the 'daywalker' mutation of the transformative from Evan gives me an additional reason to hope."

"Are you going to ask Lane or Duran to bite him?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"No. There's a possibility that they can't pass on what Evan passed to them. Just like Beau's transformative has been altered, so might theirs have been too." Rafe carefully explained.

"So, if Beau bit someone, would they become a Shadesider or possibly even a werewolf?" Dodger asked curiously.

"While either is possible, I think it's more likely that his form of the transformative would be deadly to Brightsiders and might even pose some kind of risk to Shadesiders." Rafe explained seriously.

"So what are you going to do?" Dodger asked anxiously.

"I have an uncontaminated sample of Evan's transformative that I can use to give Devin... I mean, Beau, the most concentrated and straightforward form of the new transformative to work with. By all that I know, that should provide us the best chance for a favorable outcome." Rafe finished seriously.

"It sounds like we're going to have a full day. Let's go to bed." Dodger said wearily as he stood.

"Are *we* okay?" Rafe cautiously asked.

"Just because I understand something doesn't mean that I have to like it. I'm unhappy about what had to be done, but I'm not angry with you, I'm angry with the world... We're fine."

"Stupid world." Rafe said with a loving grin at his partner.

"Yeah." Dodger smiled as he moved into Rafe's embrace.

"Come on." Rafe said softly as he guided Dodger toward the staircase.

* * * * *

"Why did you leave us downstairs last night?" Lane asked as he walked into the kitchen, with his hair sticking up in a cow-lick and still wearing sleep-rumpled clothes from the night before.

"The three of you seemed to be sharing some special time together, I didn't want to interrupt that for you." Dodger said simply as he added dry ingredients to a bowl.

"Does Rafe still want to do it?" Lane asked anxiously.

"Beau's treatment? Yes. Later this morning, once everyone's up." Dodger confirmed.

"Is there anything at all you can think of that we can do to improve his chances?"

"Prayer?" Dodger offered weakly.

Lane's dubious look was epic in its proportion.

"Whether you pray to a deity for divine intervention or just send positive energy in Beau's direction, it's possible that it might make some kind of difference or even tip the balance." Dodger said frankly.

"Are you going to be praying?" Lane asked curiously.

"With every fiber of my being." Dodger said simply.

Lane nodded to acknowledge that he had heard.

"Of course, all three of us are probably going to be working to use the thrall to keep Beau calm through all of this. Praying is about as much else as we'll be able to do for him." Dodger said honestly.

"When's breakfast?" Duran asked as he scuffed into the kitchen.

"About fifteen minutes. I'm just about to start mixing the waffle batter."

"Good. Lane? Do you want to help me take a quick shower?" Duran asked hopefully.

"You don't know what a 'quick' shower is." Lane chuckled.

"What? Are you not in the mood?" Duran challenged.

"I didn't say that!" Lane firmly defended, then told Dodger, "We'll be back as soon as we can."

"I won't hold everyone's breakfast for you, but I'll wait to make *your* waffles until you're ready for them." Dodger assured him.

"Thanks Dodger. We'll try not to be too *too* long." Lane said with a slight blush and a grin.

"Have fun." Dodger chuckled.

The grin on Duran's face assured Dodger that they likely would.

* * * * *

"There's food on the table and the boys aren't in here? What's wrong?" Rafe asked with concern as he walked into the kitchen.

"They're taking a 'quick' shower." Dodger said with a knowing grin.

"Right. I've fallen for that one before. I won't plan anything involving them before this afternoon."

"What about Beau? Are you still going to do his treatment today?" Dodger asked to confirm.

"Yes. Most likely. After we've finished with breakfast, would you mind taking a minute to help me collect a fresh sample from him?"

"Of course."

"Good. After I've had a chance to look it over and verify that all his levels are good, I'll see to administering the treatment."

"I told the boys that the three of us could help to support Beau by using the thrall to keep him calm while you're doing your treatment. Is that alright?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"Actually, you would probably know better than I would. Beau will basically be going through the change, the same as a Brightsider who had just been bitten." Rafe said seriously.

"I didn't think of it that way." Dodger said slowly, then explained, "If that's true, then the last thing we would want to do is enthrall him. If Beau detected the thrall, he could instinctively construct a defense against beneficial emotions, turning him fully into a Darksider."

"I'll have to leave that aspect of things to you then, and I'll stay on station in the event of any medical needs." Rafe said seriously.

"If it goes wrong, there isn't anything more you can do for him, is there?" Dodger asked curiously.

"Probably not for Beau, but if he were to bite one of you, we might have a rather serious problem on our hands." Rafe said frankly.

"Do you think that his transformative would override ours?" Dodger asked with concern.

"I don't know. Not only is Beau as healthy as he's ever been, but unfortunately, so is the version of the transformative that he's carrying." Rafe explained, then continued, "My first instinct is to say that a bite from him wouldn't do much of anything to us, but I can't dismiss the *possibility* that it could interact with *our* transformative causing a catastrophic reaction throughout the entire infected body."

"I assume that you're going to do something to test that before we find out the hard way." Dodger said in a leading tone.

"I will once Beau has completed his treatment. There isn't much I can do until we see what type of transformative he ends up carrying." Rafe said frankly.

"I thought it would be Evan's version." Dodger said slowly.

"That's possible. Some sort of mutation of Evan's is another. Then there's always a possibility that Beau's transformative will adjust itself to cohabit with Evan's, distorting the daywalker transformative in ways that I can't anticipate." Rafe finished gravely.

"But until his physiology has stabilized, you won't be able to get a sample that you can use to test what happens when his transformative mixes with ours." Dodger said speculatively.

"Yes. For now, we have to confirm that Beau is as ready as he can be to have the treatment."

"Do you want to do it now?" Dodger asked cautiously.

Rafe looked down at his empty plate for a moment, then came to a decision.

"Yes. We won't be helping anyone by putting it off. Let's get this thing started."

* * * * *

When Rafe and Dodger started walking down the stairs, Beau hurried up to meet them. He was as excited as always to see them and wanted *all* their attention.

"Yes. We're here to visit with you. And don't worry, Lane and Duran are going to be back before too long." Dodger said as he worked to soothe the emotionally needy werewolf.

"Go ahead and calm him while I get ready."

"I'm working on it." Dodger said as he began to glow.

Beau curled himself into Dodger's shoulder and snuggled for all he was worth.

"I hope this works." Rafe said quietly as he watched and waited for Beau to be ready for him.

"Whatever happens next, we'll face it together." Dodger said quietly as he placed a gentle hand on the back of Beau's head to further comfort him.

"Do you think he's ready?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"Yes. He's as relaxed as he gets." Dodger assured him.

As Rafe was about to move in to take a blood sample, something caught his attention and he backed away cautiously.

"What is it?" Dodger asked quietly in an obvious attempt not to startle Beau with his question.

"Your wings, they're not fanned out behind you, they're wrapped around you and Beau." Rafe said curiously.

Dodger slowly smiled, then explained, "I've been using the thrall so much since Beau joined us that I think that it has started manifesting more fully."

"You never cease to amaze me." Rafe said warmly.

"He's ready if you are." Dodger said as he ever so gently petted the back of Beau's head.

Rafe smiled as he went to work, making every effort to make the pin prick as painless as possible for his young patient.

After a long moment, Rafe quietly said, "I've got everything I need for now. I'll be in my office for a while, if you need me for anything."

"I think I'll stay down here with Beau for now. If you run into the boys upstairs, tell Duran to go ahead and make waffles for him and Lane whenever they're ready. Everything's set out for them." Dodger said gently.

"Duran, but not Lane?" Rafe asked to confirm his understanding of the instructions.

"Yes. I'm convinced that Lane could burn the house down making a bowl of cereal."

"If I see Duran, I'll be sure to pass on your message." Rafe said warmly.

As Rafe leaned in to give Dodger a kiss, the young werewolf between them decided that he wanted to get in on the action as well.

Before Rafe could back away, both he and Dodger had received sloppy kisses from Beau.

Rafe couldn't resist the urge and gave Beau a firm kiss on the cheek before standing to leave.

"Let me know if you think of anything else we can do to improve his chances... anything." Dodger reiterated firmly.

"I will. I promise." Rafe assured him before walking with purpose back to the stairs.

Chapter 27

"When do you think Rafe will be ready to do it?" Lane asked as he walked down the stairs.

"He just took a blood sample and is looking at it now. I'd guess that it could be any minute." Dodger said gently as he held Beau close to his side and did his best to let the young werewolf know that he was loved.

"Duran's cleaning up the kitchen. He shouldn't be long." Lane said as he tentatively sat down on the opposite end of the couch.

"Are you going to be alright?" Dodger asked with concern.

"Yeah. No matter which way it goes, I'll get through it. If nothing else, I need to be strong for Duran to show him how to deal with things." Lane said seriously, then added more quietly, "This could destroy him."

"I'll do my best to give you space to work things out on your own, but remember that I'm here for both of you if you need me." Dodger said frankly.

"I keep forgetting that you're so much older than we are. You're probably used to stuff like this." Lane said with a pained smile.

"Actually, no. Losing the precious people in your life never gets any easier, it's just as raw and painful every single time. The most you can do is surround yourself with trusted friends and family and try to develop effective coping strategies to help you past the worst of it." Dodger said quietly.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs drew their attention. Even Beau looked up to see who was about to join them.

"How was the blood test?" Dodger asked anxiously.

"As good as I could have hoped." Rafe said as he descended the stairs with Duran at his side.

"So you're going to do it now?" Dodger cautiously asked.

"Yes. Unless you can come up with a compelling reason for us to delay it." Rafe said unenthusiastically.

"I would really like to put it off, but I know that that won't improve Beau's chances of coming through this." Dodger said regretfully.

"That's right. This is his absolute best chance to overcome his condition and recover to any notable degree." Rafe said sensibly, leaving no room for ambiguity.

"What do you need for us to do?" Dodger asked resignedly.

"If you'd move Beau over to the mattresses, we might appreciate the extra room to spread out later." Rafe said professionally.

"You're probably right." Dodger said quietly as he coaxed Beau to stand with him.

"I think Duran should take your place holding Beau." Rafe said simply.

"Is that okay with you?" Dodger cautiously asked his nephew.

"Yeah. If that's where Beau needs me, then that's where I'll be." Duran said uncharacteristically seriously.

Dodger cautiously scooted away from Beau enough so that Duran could wedge himself between them.

As soon as Beau had transferred his hug to Duran, Dodger moved to Rafe's side.

"Lane, why don't you get in there and hug them both?"

"What are you up to?" Dodger asked curiously.

"I'm just trying to make it so that Beau has everyone who keeps him safe and secure as close as possible before we do anything else. Once things get set into motion, there's no turning back." Rafe said professionally.

"Where do you want me?" Dodger asked cautiously.

"Here with me is fine. I think Beau will feel most reassured if he knows that you're nearby, watching over him and ready to help whenever he needs you." Rafe said thoughtfully.

"Is there *anything* else we can do to improve his chances of coming through this?" Lane asked anxiously as he settled into place with Beau and Duran on one of the mattresses on the floor..

"From a medical standpoint, I've done all that I can do. I think that if there's anything else that can be done to influence the outcome, it's going to have to be up to Dodger. He's the one who's studied the intricacies of the Shadesider transformation." Rafe said frankly.

Dodger slowly nodded, then quietly said, "Guys, listen. It sounds to me like Beau is about to be dragged through the Shadesider change backward and possibly inside out. What's worse, I have a feeling that we're not going to be able to use the thrall to try and calm him. If we do, it will more than likely push him into losing his humanity completely."

"Hasn't he already?" Duran asked curiously.

"He's lost his higher reasoning, but he still has a good heart and an innocent soul. I'm afraid if we mess this up, he'll lose that too." Dodger said frankly.

"What we're about to do, will it do anything to get his reasoning back?" Lane asked cautiously.

"It might. I can think of a dozen different ways that this could turn out and there are probably a dozen more that I haven't even thought of yet." Rafe said honestly.

"But if we do nothing, he'll never improve. No matter how hard we try, we won't be able to prevent despair from chipping away at him until someday, possibly tomorrow, possibly a century away, his goodness will eventually be extinguished." Dodger quietly explained.

"But this will change that?" Duran asked uncertainly.

"It could." Rafe hurried to declare.

"In living his life surrounded by good friends and in achieving things for himself, he'll be able to stave off the despair that often seeks to ruin people. If we can get him to the point where he can feel a sense of family or community, we'll have a good foundation to deal with the rest." Dodger said frankly.

A long silence fell over the group as they all waited for someone to take the next step.

Finally Rafe reluctantly said, "If you guys want to gently enthrall him, I'll give him the injection."

"I thought you *just* told us not to enthrall him." Lane said cautiously.

"Don't enthrall him once the change has begun. But if possible I'd like to keep him calm at the beginning of the process. Him having a panic attack over the needle might not be the best way for us to start this out." Rafe quietly explained.

"How about I handle the thrall and let you three relax for now?" Dodger asked in a soothing voice.

"Sounds good." Duran said as he snuggled into Beau's embrace.

Lane reconfirmed his hold on his family, then nodded to Dodger that he was ready.

Dodger, in turn, glanced at Rafe to be sure that he too was ready to begin.

"From this point on, there's no stopping, there's no turning back. If something seems to be going wrong, do your best to turn it around. All of us need to work together to see this through." Rafe said solemnly.

"Got it." Dodger said in nearly a whisper, then began to glow as he very gently, yet very precisely, sent out a flood of contentment and well-being.

After a moment for the thrall to take hold, Rafe moved forward and gave Beau the tiniest little 'prick' of an injection, which Beau didn't even seem to notice.

"Ease off the thrall and from here on out we'll do our best to keep Beau comfortable and happy the old-fashioned way." Rafe said as he backed away and discretely tucked the spent hypodermic into his little black bag.

"If you want him to be happy there are things... I mean, he already knows about whacking off, so it's not like we'd be corrupting him." Lane said uncomfortably.

"If he ends up going down that path on his own, we'll accompany him, but I would rather not push him in that direction. Traditionally, the transformative rewires the emotions and thought processes. Whatever Beau is going to become might well be determined by the decisions we make here today." Dodger said instructively.

"I thought you and Leila did all kinds of sexy things when you were helping people through the change." Lane said honestly.

"Yes. But in those cases we're dealing with people who can be reasoned with. In Beau's case we're essentially dealing with animal intelligence. Hopefully our talking to him and holding him will help him form pathways to his higher reasoning rather than to his primal instincts." Dodger said frankly.

"Are you talking about providing intellectual stimulation?" Rafe asked cautiously.

"Yes, but not randomly. What we do and what we say this afternoon might end up determining the type of person he eventually becomes." Dodger fought to explain.

"And you don't want him turning out to be some sex-obsessed weirdo who's whacking off all the time?" Duran guessed.

"I'm hoping that we can do better than that." Dodger confirmed, then added more quietly, "We only get one chance."

"Then we'd better make it count." Lane said anxiously.

"How likely is it that once Beau's all rewired that we'll end up with Devin?" Duran cautiously asked.

"I won't say it's *impossible*, but I think we're talking about a one in a million billion or so chance." Rafe said honestly.

"Do you *want* Devin back?" Lane asked curiously.

"I just want for Beau to be happy. If he woke up as Devin, there might be a way that he could be." Duran said seriously.

"It wouldn't be easy, but I think we could find a way to make it work." Rafe said honestly.

"I think something's happening." Duran said hesitantly.

"Keep in mind that Beau's got a battle going on inside him at the cellular level. What we see out here is most likely just the aftermath of some of the battles. Don't be discouraged if things appear to be going badly for a moment." Rafe gently cautioned.

"He's sweating." Duran said simply.

"Try to give him a little air to make him comfortable, but do your best to make sure that he doesn't feel abandoned or rejected by you." Dodger said cautiously.

"Do you want to get in here and do this? You want me to let him go without letting him feel like I let go? Just how the hell do you suggest that I do that?" Duran asked belligerently.

"There's the Duran that I'm used to dealing with." Rafe chuckled.

"Good. Beau wouldn't recognize him being all nice and gentle like that." Dodger agreed.

"You know what? You guys do whatever you want. I'm going to help Beau my way." Duran said frankly as he struggled to pull his shirt off over his head.

"Actually, that sounds good to me. You being yourself is probably the best way to lure Beau out of his internal hiding place." Dodger said frankly.

"Would you just decide what you want me to do before he completely changes?" Duran asked frustratedly.

"This is a unique situation. We're doing our best to come up with ideas of what to do next, but there's no manual on how to convert a werewolf into something else." Dodger fought to explain.

"So Beau's not going to be a werewolf anymore?" Lane asked curiously.

"Possibly not. We'll just have to wait and see how it ends up." Rafe said honestly.

"It's okay, Buddy. I've got you." Duran said gently as he cuddled, skin-to-skin with Beau.

"Do you want me to take my shirt off too?" Lane asked uncertainly.

"Not yet. Right now just hold us and keep us safe." Duran said seriously.

"I'm going to get some juice so that you can have a drink if anyone starts getting thirsty." Dodger said as he started across the room.

"Buh." Beau said in nearly a whisper.

"What was that, Beau? What did you say?" Duran asked excitedly.

"Buh." He said again, this time more confidently.

"Maybe he's trying to say his name." Dodger cautiously suggested as he hurried back to the mattress where the boys were.

"Buh." Beau said as he got a determined look.

"Beau. Buh-oh. Beau." Rafe slowly enunciated.

"Buh-buh." Beau said uncertainly.

"You know what? If you want to go by Bubba, I have no problem with that. I'll be happy to call you that all day long." Duran said with a joyous laugh under his words.

"Let's not settle for second best just yet. Once Beau's completed his change, we can take stock of what we've got to work with." Dodger said urgently.

"Beau? Can you say Beau?" Lane gently asked.

Beau appeared to summon his resolve before carefully articulating, "Beau."

Lane, Duran, Dodger and Rafe cheered in triumph.

"Yes! That's it! That's how you do it!" Duran exclaimed.

"Can you do it again?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"Say 'Beau'. Come on. I know you can do it." Lane implored him.

"Beau." He said with more confidence and a burgeoning smile.

"Excellent!"

"Way to go!"

"Beau, can you say anything else? Can you say Lane?" Dodger quickly asked.

"He just figured out how to say his own name. If we push him too hard he might lose it." Duran said worriedly.

"Or his brain might be at its peak of elasticity and what we do now might give him the tools that he will have to work with for the rest of his life." Dodger countered.

"Say 'Duran'." Duran urged him.

"Can you say 'Lane'?" Lane asked hopefully.

"Can you tell us if you're hungry or thirsty?" Dodger asked urgently.

"I think you're overwhelming him. Why don't you stop interrogating him for a minute and let him know that he's loved?" Rafe cautiously suggested.

"Love?" Beau asked in a bewildered voice.

"Yes, we absolutely love you." Duran hurried to assure him.

"We all love you very much." Dodger said gently.

"He's starting to shake again. I don't think he's cold. I think it's more like a seizure." Lane said anxiously.

"Don't restrain him, we don't want him to feel trapped. But do what you can to reassure him that it's going to be alright and try to keep him calm." Rafe instructed professionally.

"It's okay Beau. We've got you." Duran hurried to assure him.

"Beau." The boy said with a terrified tremble in his voice.

"That's right. You're Beau and everyone here loves you very much." Lane said in as calm a voice as he could manage.

"His shaking seems to be easing." Duran reported cautiously.

"Good. Just let it pass. That was probably some old werewolf cells that didn't want to make way for the updated Shadesider cells." Rafe said in a calming tone.

"So you think it's working?" Dodger asked cautiously, obviously reluctant to hope.

"*Something's* happening. Preliminary evidence would suggest that it might be something good. All I can do is speculate at this point." Rafe said honestly.

"Durr..." Beau struggled to say, but seemed to get caught.

"You've almost got it. You can go ahead and stop and then do the 'an' at the end." Duran hurried to explain.

"Dur Anne." Lane said slowly, drawing out the pronunciation.

"Durrah." Beau said uncertainly as he looked deeply into Duran's eyes.

"That's pretty close. I think with a little practice you'll have it just fine." Duran assured him.

The delight shown brilliantly in Beau's eyes as he felt joy over his accomplishment.

"Can you say 'Lane' now?" Lane asked hopefully.

A puzzled expression fell across Beau's face, then a moment later, he absently mumbled, "I don't know."

"Don't worry about it. Are you hungry or thirsty?" Dodger hurriedly asked.

"No. I don't think so." Beau said uncertainly.

"What about the bathroom? Do you feel like you need to go?" Dodger asked seriously, trying to not put too much pressure on the fragile boy.

"Yeah. I think that's what I'm feeling." Beau muttered absently.

"Do you remember where your sandbox is?" Dodger asked hopefully.

"Yeah. But I'd rather use a toilet, if you can tell me where it is." Beau mumbled timidly.

"It's right over there beside your sandbox, just open the door." Dodger assured him.

Beau wriggled loose from his bedmates and bounded across the room on all fours.

"Do you think he'll want to wear clothes?" Duran asked curiously.

"It's possible. Do you have anything he could wear?" Rafe asked in return.

"Things like socks maybe. I'm a lot smaller than he is." Duran said honestly.

"I'm too tall and thin to be able to share my clothes with him." Lane automatically volunteered.

"I should have some things he can wear. As long as they don't offend his sense of style, they should fit him otherwise." Dodger said as he started toward the stairs.

"Be sure to get him something like gym shorts or sweatpants, in case he isn't ready to commit to being 'fully' clothed just yet." Rafe quickly suggested.

"I'll find something." Dodger assured Rafe as he headed for the door.

* * * * *

"How are you doing, Beau?" Rafe asked when he noticed the boy cautiously walking upright toward them.

"Is that my name?" Beau asked uncertainly.

"It's the name that we've given you. If you'd rather be called something else, we could probably do that." Rafe easily explained.

"No. That's okay. I just wasn't sure." Beau said distractedly.

Rafe noticed that Beau had his hands strategically placed to cover himself.

"Dodger's upstairs getting you some clothes. You can wear them if you like." Rafe said in a low, even voice, to hopefully put Beau at ease.

"Why am I naked?" Beau asked cautiously.

"You were naked when we found you and you haven't shown any interest in wearing clothes since. You can choose to wear clothes or not, as you like. We won't be upset with you either way." Rafe said seriously.

"Yeah. I think I'd like to." Beau said quietly.

A sound upstairs caused Rafe to look up as Beau followed his lead.

"Beau has said that he'd like to wear clothes." Rafe happily announced.

"I grabbed a few things for you to choose from." Dodger said as he continued down the stairs.

"Why can't I remember who I am?" Beau asked in an anguished tone.

"You were somehow infected with a transformative agent. Your body couldn't process it the way most people do, so along with some other changes, you also lost your higher reasoning for a while." Rafe explained as Dodger handed Beau some soft comfortable clothes.

"So why can I understand you now?" Beau asked cautiously, half afraid of the answer, as he examined the clothes, deciding what he wanted to wear.

"Over the last several weeks, we've worked to get you as healthy as possible so I could try an experimental treatment on you to hopefully reverse some of your condition." Rafe cautiously explained.

"So it worked?" Beau asked hopefully as he pulled on a pair of gym shorts.

"Something happened, and it seems like it's something good, but the treatment's not complete so you could still regress to some degree before it's all over." Rafe said seriously.

"Without being able to think, I'm not really a person, am I?" Beau asked bravely before pulling a plain white t-shirt over his head.

"Since you seem to have reclaimed your ability to speak rather than having to relearn it, I think it indicates that there are things hidden within your mind that might be accessible by some means or method that we haven't tried yet." Rafe said seriously.

"Do I even *want* to remember being the person I was before?" Beau cautiously asked.

"I can't answer that. From all indications, you were a perfectly normal boy leading a wholly unremarkable life. I can say with some certainty that you can never go back to *being* the person that he was, but I'd guess that it's at least *possible* for you to remember his life." Rafe said frankly.

"But something to keep in mind is that being like we are makes it so you can't really have very many relationships with people who aren't... us." Duran stammered at the end.

"I don't understand." Beau said in a voice that was beginning to tremble.

"Why don't you sit down with the guys while I get us all some juice?" Dodger asked encouragingly.

Beau seemed uncertain about what he should do, but offered no resistance as Dodger guided him to sit on the couch as Lane and Duran moved over from the mattress to join him in a more 'civilized' setting.

"It's okay, Beau. We'll keep you safe." Duran fought to assure him.

"But why? I'm just some stranger that you found, right?" Beau asked cautiously.

"We're Shadesiders. We don't have babies." Lane carefully explained, then glanced at Rafe before amending, "Usually."

"That's right. This is how Shadesiders reproduce, a regular person gets changed into one of us and if everyone involved is very lucky, the new person gets to join a family and become part of their community." Rafe gently explained.

"Shadesiders?" Beau asked cautiously.

"Yeah. Like vampires, but without the bad attitude." Duran said gently to assure him.

"Or sparkles." Lane hurried to add.

"It doesn't matter. Just as long as you know that you've got people that love you and that you can depend on." Lane said warmly.

"Love?" Beau asked cautiously.

"When we found you, basically functioning like an animal, we took on the commitment to look after you and help you however we can." Rafe quietly explained.

"And when you did that, you decided to love me?" Beau asked even more slowly.

"I don't know if anyone decided that part, but in the process of taking care of you and sharing in the achievements that you were able to make, we've all adopted you as part of our family and began to love you." Lane explained.

"You *all* love me?" Beau asked uncertainly as he looked around.

"Yes. Each of us in his own way." Dodger said as he handed Beau a sports bottle of juice.

Nods of agreement went around the group.

"How do I know if I love you?" Beau asked anxiously.

"That's a tough one. You're a teenager, so that not only means that all your emotions are jacked up to eleven, but also that your feelings can turn on a dime." Dodger said frankly.

"Hey, we're teenagers too." Lane said in offense.

"Your point being?" Dodger said sweetly.

"To answer Beau's original question, I don't know how you'll know if you love us, but what I would *expect* to happen is for you to love some of us sometimes, maybe hate some of us sometimes. In fact, I wouldn't

be surprised to find that you love and hate yourself at various times for various reasons too." Rafe explained.

"What if I go back to being the way I was, you know, like an animal?" Beau asked uncertainly.

"We'll do what we can to provide you the best quality of life for as long as we can." Rafe answered dispassionately.

"What does that mean?"

"We'd try to keep you fed and happy, but life has a way of seeking out that type of happiness and finding creative and interesting ways to disrupt it. Everything eventually ends, no matter how much we fight to keep it going."

"I'm feeling something. I don't want to hurt you." Beau said before dashing away from them toward the far side of the room on all fours.

"Just tell us if there's anything you need for us to do." Lane called out with obvious concern.

"Just get out of here, I'm losing it! I'm losing me!" Beau struggled to say before devolving into snarls and growls.

"We're not leaving you." Duran stated firmly.

"Yeah. No matter what happens, we'll see you through it." Lane said as he stood at Duran's side.

"I might hurt you." Beau called out in an anguished cry.

"We'll be fine. You'll be fine. However this turns out, we'll stand by you." Duran said confidently.

As Beau took off running toward them, Duran started running away from the group using quite a bit more than normal human speed and agility.

"What are you doing?" Rafe asked curiously, not raising his voice, since he knew that there was no need.

"Beau's worried about us, so I wanted to show him that we're not slow or fragile." Duran said before throwing himself, feet first, at the far wall, then bouncing himself back the direction he had come from.

Beau had stopped and was watching Duran's actions curiously.

"He might be evaluating us as potential members of his pack." Dodger cautiously suggested.

"He *could* be establishing the pack hierarchy before settling into place." Rafe suggested with a nod of confirmation.

"Either way, showcasing our abilities for him would seem to be the wisest course of action to settle his current mental state." Dodger said speculatively.

"Then let's do some showing off." Rafe said with a grin before disappearing in a flash.

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Even Dodger was surprised by the speed at which Rafe moved. Despite Shadesider enhanced vision, he could just barely keep track of him. Rafe's fluid grace reminded Dodger of a certain mugging attempt in their distant past.

"What's he doing?" Lane asked at the abrupt action.

"We're showing Beau that we're not helpless burdens and that we're worthy to be considered his packmates." Dodger said simply before projecting the thrall in such a way that he was enveloped by it, seeming to have a halo and fully formed wings.

"I thought you said 'no thrall'." Lane said hesitantly.

"We can't direct it at Beau, it might interfere with his transformation. But doing it like this demonstrates our power and shows him another valuable tool that we have in our arsenal." Dodger said frankly.

"What can I do?" Lane asked cautiously.

"If we were outside, I'd tell you to show Beau how well you can hunt and track, he would recognize the value in that. But since we're in here, you could show off your control of the thrall, or maybe just show him how strong you are." Dodger suggested as peace and benevolence radiated out from him.

Lane glanced at Dodger dubiously, then turned to Beau and tentatively asked, "Do you want to arm wrestle?"

Lane couldn't be sure if Beau understood him or if he interpreted his caution as weakness, but either way, in an instant, Lane found himself face-to-face with Beau, with their fingers interlocked, trying to force each other to take a step back.

"That's it Lane! Show him that you're not a skinny little string bean!" Dodger called out with a grin.

"Not helping!" Lane responded past gritted teeth, while maintaining his balance and strength to match Beau move for move.

"How do you like that? I go to all the effort of being impressive and he focuses all his attention on Lane." Rafe said as he fell into place at Dodger's side.

"Tell me about it." Duran said as he stopped running and moved to stand in line with Rafe and Dodger.

"No matter what you say, no matter what you do, we're never going to give up on you." Lane ground out as he continued to match Beau's strength and held him at a standstill.

Beau reconfirmed his footing and pushed back with all his might.

"No matter how deep you go into yourself, you'll always know that you'll never be left completely on your own." Lane said as he held his ground.

"You're part of our pack, Beau. We share your triumphs just as much as your defeats." Dodger said firmly.

"Are you guys going to help me or not?" Lane called out in a voice strained with effort.

"He's not testing us right now. He's testing *you*." Dodger said frankly.

"Are you strong enough to watch his back? Are you smart enough to keep your pack safe? Are you powerful enough to be his alpha?" Rafe asked seriously.

"You got this, Lane!" Duran said confidently.

"But I can't be the alpha! I'm just barely getting my own life put in order." Lane objected.

"Beau needs you to be his alpha. That would make you the leader of your pack. Once that's all established, your pack can coexist with *my* pack, at least, for as long as our goals align." Rafe cautiously explained.

"Are you expecting us to go somewhere?" Duran asked curiously.

"Eventually the young ones will leave the nest to go out and forge their own destinies. Who knows? One of these days, Beau may be ready to establish a pack of his own." Rafe said, finishing with a smile.

"Beau, I don't want to fight you, but if I have to prove that I'm strong to you, so that you'll feel safe enough to stay with us, then that's what I'll do." Lane said with conviction as he searched Beau's eyes, looking for any indication of intelligence.

When Beau twisted, trying to gain the upper hand, Lane instead threw his weight in that direction and in doing so, pulled Beau off his feet, causing him to land on his back.

Lane kept his fingers interlocked with Beau's as he moved onto Beau's chest and forced his hands back to the ground.

"I love you Beau. I don't want to fight you, but I *will* fight to protect you. Just find a way to let me know what you need and I'll do whatever it takes to prove that this is the best place for you." Lane said firmly.

"This world doesn't make sense." Beau growled.

"That's why we need to stand together to face it."

"We're stronger together?" Beau cautiously asked.

"We're stronger, faster, and more powerful in a lot of ways. If you fall short in some way, one of us will step forward, just the same as we'll count on you to step up and help us when the time comes." Lane explained seriously.

"Something's happening. Something's moving under my skin... in my teeth. You'd better let go of me." Beau said anxiously.

"Dodger? Did you hear that?" Lane asked as he disengaged from his hold on Beau.

"Since his case is so unique, I can't be sure, but it sounds like he might be finishing his transformation." Dodger said uncertainly.

"That's awfully quick, isn't it?" Rafe asked curiously.

"He was already mostly transformed from his encounter with the Darksider transformative. The introduction of the Daywalker variant didn't have a lot left to change, so it would stand to reason that it might not take nearly as long for the transformation to complete." Dodger said speculatively.

"That would make sense from the medical side of things too. Most of his physiology has already been altered. We'll just have to wait and see how it ends up." Rafe said simply.

"Isn't there anything we can do to make it easier for him?" Lane asked desperately.

"I have a feeling that the rest is up to him. We've explained his situation to him and told him how we feel about things, but what we can't do is fight this battle for him. He's going to have to fight for whatever humanity he can recover for himself." Rafe explained.

While the four watched, Beau squatted and began to physically transform.

His earlier physical alteration had been described as him being a werewolf, however now his body hair was growing and his skeletal structure seemed to be changing.

"What's happening to him?" Dodger asked in a hollow voice of disbelief.

"It seems that the stories about werewolves weren't as fanciful as I originally thought." Rafe said frankly.

"So he's actually turning into a wolf?" Lane asked as he backed away from Beau to stare in horror.

"His werewolf transformation appears to be progressing to a new level. That doesn't mean that it will turn him fully into a wolf or that he won't be able to change back. It just means that he's taken his ability to transform himself to a place that I didn't think was possible." Rafe said seriously.

"So he can change back?" Dodger asked to verify his understanding.

"It's possible, but there's nothing to say that he will. I can't even imagine what he's feeling. It might be beyond his capacity to consciously take that step. If that were to be the case, then he might return to his human appearance when he's sleeping and become this... creature, when he wakes up." Rafe said seriously.

"So you don't think that he'll just turn into a wolf on the full moon?" Lane asked curiously.

"I can't see any reason why he would. Nothing I've seen so far suggests that there's any supernatural cause for his condition. But considering all the strangeness in the world, I also can't say that it's outside the realm of possibility."

"What's he doing now?" Duran asked cautiously.

"Evaluating us, I think. Perhaps his conscious mind and his animal instincts are trying to decide if we're friends or foes." Rafe said slowly.

"He doesn't seem to be reacting to my thrall." Dodger cautiously mentioned.

"We know it affects him when it's directed at him, but he doesn't seem to be worried about it otherwise." Rafe observed.

"Maybe he's had enough positive experiences with it that he doesn't perceive it as a threat." Dodger suggested.

"Yes. By using it to provide him safety and comfort you've shown him that it's nothing to be afraid of." Rafe agreed.

"How did his hair grow like that?" Duran asked curiously.

"You know how your hair stands on end when you get spooked? I'm guessing that it's some variation of that natural mechanism, altered by his new physiology." Rafe said speculatively.

"So just like our teeth drop to give us fangs, his skin changed to give him a fur coat?" Duran asked cautiously.

"That's my guess. Whatever it is, I feel safe in saying that it's a completely natural physiological phenomena without any mystical component." Rafe said with reasonable confidence.

"Do you think he'll ever go back to being a person again?" Lane asked anxiously.

After a long tense moment, Rafe finally admitted, "I honestly don't know."