

When I heard the door open, I immediately looked up to see who had entered. There are a great many students at Hearthstone Academy, but the vast majority are entirely preoccupied with making provisions for their futures. As such, they generally spend most of their time studying those subjects which are of clear value and utility in the Courts, while their free time is devoted to the extremes of pleasure-seeking. This library, which contained historical works focusing primarily on social and economic topics, was of little use in either pursuit, and as such I had very seldom encountered another student here. When I heard another person come in I thought that it might be one of my few friends, as they would certainly think to look here if they wanted to find me.

Instead, I saw the werewolf called Bryan Ferguson. While he had still clearly come here with the intent of speaking to me, the meaning was very different.

I slipped a ribbon into the book of kobold history I was reading and set it to the side. There was little point in continuing, after all.

Bryan could not have seen my alcove on the upper level from the door, but he did not bother pretending that he did not know where I was. In my experience Bryan very seldom bothers with any pretense at all.

I sat back in my chair and sipped at the glass of water I had brought, watching him cross the library and begin climbing the narrow staircase to the upper level. Across from me, Hikaru rose from the padded bench he was resting on, stretched, and walked over to sit next to me. Notably, he did not return to the form of a stuffed animal, as he usually would when another person was approaching.

Most likely such caution was unnecessary. At this point, there was little to no reason to think that Bryan would act to cause me harm. If he did, however, Hikaru would need to react immediately to have any chance of saving me.

"Good morning," Bryan said as he reached the top of the stairs and turned towards me.

"It is evening, locally," I said, stroking Hikaru's back. There was no particular warmth in the action, on either side. Petting him was a habitual behavior on my part, much as flicking an ear in annoyance was a habitual gesture on his. The interaction had long since become so casual as to be nearly meaningless.

"My mistake," Bryan said. "Thank you for correcting me. I have an excursion planned. I believe it will be of educational merit to you."

I nodded and stood. The statement was so uninformative that I would have questioned why he bothered making it, were it anyone other than Bryan. I could count on the fingers of no hands the number of times he had come to visit me without a reason, and the vast majority of them had been educational excursions.

Many of them had been less than enjoyable. But there was no point in arguing. Debt cuts both ways, after all.

"What destination do you have in mind?" I asked, following him to the stairs. Hikaru stepped up next to me, allowing me to grasp the scruff of his neck, so that when he returned to his smaller form I could pick him up without breaking stride.

"Winter Wolf. You spoke with him last year."

"I remember." It had been an unusually pleasant outing. Relatively few of the strangers I met were willing to treat me as an equal. Most of them saw me as a child to be patronized, while the remainder were unsettled by my bearing.

"I would like you to go and assist him with a minor task. It does have a significant chance of putting you at risk." He did nothing to indicate it, but we were all aware that the final statement was not directed at me.

Hikaru snorted rudely. "I've kept the twerp alive for fifteen years," he said. "She hasn't gotten dumber, so she probably won't get killed this time either."

I wondered, as I often did, how much of Hikaru's disdain towards me was still genuine, and to what degree it was merely an imitation of a feeling which had since faded. I knew that he no longer despised me. In a sense, we might even be friends. Certainly there were times when I could convince myself we felt genuine fondness for each other.

In many ways, I supposed, it hardly mattered. The three of us were bound together by a morass of debts and obligations beyond any of our control. How we felt about it was quite immaterial.

"How long are you expecting this excursion to last?" I asked as we walked out of the library.

"Several days," Bryan said, walking briskly down the street. "Possibly as much as a week."

"There are professors I should inform, then. As well as fellow students who might be concerned by my absence."

"They have been notified," he said. His tone did not change, but his meaning had become dismissive.

I nodded and kept walking without comment. Hikaru growled quietly, but did not react otherwise. Regardless of how he felt about Bryan's casual disregard for my desire to tell my friends goodbye in person, he knew better than to challenge the werewolf on it.

Besides, there was little sense in doing so. Bryan was damaged, and had been for a very long time. He was, on a fundamental level, not capable of forming or understanding meaningful relationships. Criticizing him for that was akin to criticizing a wolf for eating meat.

Nothing more was said as we walked through the Academy.

It was a tediously long walk. The library, like most of the buildings intended for student use, was relatively near to the periphery of the Academy, but it was still several miles to the nearest sanctioned exit. I was tempted to suggest the use of public transportation, but it would have been a waste of breath. Bryan had spent more than enough time here to know about it. If we were walking, it was because he had chosen to walk, and he most likely had a reason for it.

Eventually, after roughly an hour of walking, we reached the edge of the Academy. We passed under the outer wall, a shell of grey stone thick enough for entire buildings to be built into it, and stepped out onto the bridge. I didn't remember using this bridge before, but it was much like all the others, a delicate construction of dark metal that spanned the canyon in a single graceful arch. A bridge of steel would have required multiple piers to support it across such a gap, but of course there was no steel in the Academy.

It had been years since a student jumped from one of the bridges. I wondered, as I sometimes did, what it might be like. The rushing of the wind. The pounding of my heart. Watching the water get closer and closer. At that speed, it would be little different from hitting concrete.

There was no real danger of that, of course. Even if I were to jump, Hikaru would hardly allow me to hit the water. It was almost sad, in a way.

I wouldn't have jumped. I have no desire to die. But it would have been nice to have the choice.

Bryan led us up the gradual rise on the other side of the canyon, making sure we were well outside the Academy's wards. I was getting tired, but we were nearly done walking. I could wait to rest until we had finished.

I could have ridden Hikaru. He wouldn't have objected, particularly given that we were well away from prying eyes. But I had no desire to do so, not with Bryan there. Our odd, delicate friendship was not something I wanted to share with Bryan.

At the top of the rise, he began work on the portal that would take us out of this world. I turned back, looking at the Academy. It wasn't that great of a view, but there was nothing else out here but endless, featureless grey plains. Even the Academy was more interesting to look at than that.

We weren't high enough for me to see over the walls, but I could see four of the nine bridges connecting the Academy to the outside world. Dormitories and libraries huddled against the walls, many of them tall enough to see from outside, while further in buildings housing classrooms and the support facilities necessary to sustain the Academy loomed over them. At the very center a single tower rose to the sky, impossibly high, with the light of a tiny sun caged at the top.

Hearthstone Academy. The finest home I'll never have.

I sighed and turned to follow Bryan through the portal.