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WARNING: May contain coarse language, violence, gore, or sexual content. Reader discretion is advised.

Chapter 26. "Lost Souls"

The two made their way to the exit. Troy stopped Luger and wiped the bottoms of his hooves, then followed him out in the hallway. Troy marched across to the laundry room door with a determined look and angry thoughts stirring in his head. It would've been easier to maintain if not for Luger's silly antics. Luger had such a massive grin on his face. He seemed to be almost skipping - like he did earlier when going back to the drying room. Troy was finding it difficult to maintain his composure.

The laundry room door slid to the side. Troy took a confident step in and looked around. He tossed the towels into the proper bin behind the counter with a bit too much enthusiasm, but he wanted to start the encounter with the tigress - who was the only one in the room at one of the folding counters - properly. Troy didn't like that it was her but, in the same hand, was glad it was her. He walked over by her and waited for her attention. Troy was infinitely happy she was fully clothed for this. He was equally happy there weren't any lingering scents that would make him lose himself.

The tigress huffed out a breath and slammed the shirt she was folding onto the counter. She brought her hands up and massaged her temples with her eyes closed as she groaned. She finally spoke as she turned to face Troy.

"What the fuh-huh...?"

Her words seemed to be stuck in her throat when she turned to face him. Her eyes had traveled past Troy to where Luger was standing. When her eyes locked on him, Luger bowed his "knees" in and brought his fists up under his chin as if to block her angry stare. Her angry face vanished with her jaw dropping about an inch and her eyelids parted just as much to pass the large, hazel iris and showed some of the sclera. Troy could see her pink nose and inner ears redden. It happened so quickly. She tore her eyes from Luger and regained her "I hate everything" stare.

“The fuck do you want?” She coarsely asked, her voice wavering a bit and switching octaves.

Troy tapped into the communicator. “What I want is for someone to assign Luger a locker with a lock and to take the garbage clothing from his room and get him some that actually fit.”

Her eyes narrowed and her fangs peeked from below her upper lip as the words filled the space they shared.

“Piss off! If the food wants to eat, it can hunt for itself,” she spat and turned back to her folding.

Troy snatched the shirt from her hands and tossed it on the far end of the counter. She whirled her head to face him with a clawed hand in tow. Troy stared into her daggered eyes as he caught her wrist in his hand. Troy furrowed his brow angrily and leaned in to stare deeper into her soul. She growled at him, then spit in his face before bringing up her other hand and striking Troy across the jaw with her free fist.

“Fuck she’s quick!” Troy thought as fists met his chest and stomach. “Thankfully, she doesn’t hit hard,” he thought during a respite as he wiped his eye of saliva. “Just not the...claws!”

“TROY!” Luger shouted.

She reached back a clawed hand and began to swing it forward. Troy could hear hooves clap against the floor as he brought a forearm up to intercept the blow. Luger crashed into her and hugged her tight as they stumbled for a few steps - her claw narrowly missing Troy’s arm.

Troy watched as they stopped moving - Luger hugging her waist just under her outstretched right arm with his head pressed into her back. She held a look of shock while Luger produced various squeaks.

“Don’t hurt my friend!” Luger squealed into her back.

Her eyes began to widen again as her claws retracted back into her extended hand. Her flaring nose and alert ears began to redden once more as a loud rumbling came from her throat. Her eyes slowly turned towards Luger as her face morphed into a pained expression - her fang biting into her lower lip. Her right hand bunched up as she

swung it at Luger and struck his back with her elbow. Luger squeaked and stumbled to the side as his hands slipped from around her.

“S-stop fondling my tit, you creep!” She yelled as Luger coughed air into his lungs.

Troy pocketed the communicator and bunched his fists while taking a step towards her. Her eyes snapped over to him as her left hand jumped up from her side and hovered in front of him - palm out. Troy stopped as they stared at each other. She used her free hand to hold her left breast.

“Fine!” She spat as she slowly lowered her left hand. “I’ll put in the request, but don’t expect it to be fulfilled. Amenities are saved for those that deserve it and he’s done no such thing,” she growled. “He may be cu-,” she continued to growl before stopping short of completing the word. Her eyes widened and darted around at the floor as if in disbelief of that word coming from her mouth. She narrowed her eyes and angrily looked back at Troy. “*Look* better in those clothes, but we don’t have the resources to freely hand them out. There’s a system in place and order to things here that you need to respect.” Her brow furrowed in a deeper state of anger with her nose wrinkling and fangs showing. “A disgusting human like you doesn’t deserve what you were requisitioned. Why don’t you give up the rights to your share if you’re so worried about what he’s given?”

Troy snatched the communicator out of his pocket as she spoke and slammed the keys on the pad. “Then do it. I don’t care,” came from the speaker. He slammed more keys before staring coldly in her eyes. “I’m sick of how you people treat him and I won’t stop fighting until he gets what he deserves. Danielle, he’s one of you, for fuck’s sake. Start treating him like it.”

She stared angrily at him until she heard her name. Her expression softened a bit as she listened to the words coming from the speaker.

“You know my,” she muttered quietly as her expression continued to soften - her nose and ears reddening again - as her eyes darted over Troy’s face.

She turned away from him and towards Luger. Her body hiccuped as she laid eyes on the gazelle that was watching them. He appeared to be squinting in pain as his left arm arched over with the hand on his back and his loose right fist in the middle of his chest. She angrily looked over her shoulder.

"I'll submit the forms. I'll put one in to get you a locker as well. You might have to share, but whatever. Get out of my sight," she spat and began to walk towards the curtained off back room.

Troy raised an eyebrow as she approached Luger. Her left hand quickly raised and a finger passed over his furred forearm. Her stride didn't falter, but her tail snapped straight and the fur on it puffed out as a short rumble came from her throat. The long, slim, puffy tail began to slither and snap like a whip behind her as she walked to the back room, stopped to take another peek, then disappeared. Troy's ears honed in on the room. He heard a "*poof*" from the couch as if her body slamming into it and a muffled scream as if she were screaming into a pillow. It didn't appear that Luger heard it as he began to slowly walk towards Troy.

"Are you okay, Luger?" Troy tapped into the keypad.

"Luger's o-gay. Luger's been hit harder. Are you o-gay, Troy?" His sweet, yet pained voice asked.

Troy winced at the phrase Luger snuck in. "I'm okay. I'm glad we got what we came for. It didn't go exactly according to plan." Troy slowly shook his head and looked up at Luger. "Let's get going," the speaker said as he turned towards the door.

"Yeah. Luger's a bit sleepy after the day he's had," Luger said with a bit of fatigue and followed behind him.

"Thank you for what you did back there, Luger," the robotic voice said as they walked down the hallway.

Luger chuckled nervously. "Luger don't really know why he did that." He nervously chuckled again. "But Troy *is* Luger's friend."

Troy smiled a bit. "That's true. Friends do that for each other."

"Troy wishes he had a friend like you back on Earth," Troy thought, then mentally slapped himself for referring to himself in third-person. He huffed out a chuckle, then looked over at Luger's beaming smile. "Such an infectious smile. She's not wrong: You are cute, Luger." Troy cringed at the thought and punched into the keypad.

"So, where are we going first?"

Luger's smile faded a bit and he looked a tad frightened.

“Uh-um...well,” he stammered and appeared to think. “That’s the laundry and the showers. This is where we all live,” he said and motioned in front of them with an upturned palm.

They passed by a couple of hallways when Luger pointed out Troy’s room down the hallway to the right. They passed by the door that looked like it was “Restricted Access.”

“Luger’s never been in there. It says it’s the “Mechanical,” “Electrical,” and “Reactor” room.”

“I can’t shake the bad feeling I get whenever I walk past this door. It seems strange that the reactor is in the middle of the residential area. Was this by design?” Troy thought and shook away the worry he was starting to feel. “Thoughts for another day.”

The entry to the cafeteria was just after that. On the other side of the cafeteria was a hydroponics farm. In the room opposite of that looked like an actual farm. There were various forms of fowl and large aquariums filled with fish.

It filled in some puzzle pieces Troy had. It made sense why those species weren’t a part of the populace he’d seen so far. They had been passing by several more species of “Furry,” “Scalie,” and “Cetacean” he hadn’t seen yet. Most of them seemed to be of the same species of either feline or canine. Everyone they passed seemed to give the two a glare, but they never called out or otherwise bothered them. Perhaps the Colonel was right when she said rumors of him were spreading.

They made their way to the end of the hall where it looked like more “Restricted” rooms to the right and the way to the President’s chambers to the left. Luger explained that the teleporter was down to the right with a prison and interrogation chamber. For obvious reasons, he stayed away from there. They walked to the left and passed by the room with all the monitors and other equipment. Luger stated that was where they monitored a bunch of things, but he wasn’t exactly sure what. The President’s room was beyond that with her chambers and personal dining area that sometimes doubled as a meeting room for the ranked officers.

They passed by more residential areas with large storage rooms to the right. They went down the left hallway to where the medical center was. The door after, Luger explained, was a research lab. They stopped at an intersection that looked familiar. Luger told him that the library was to the right. Down at the end of the hallway were

empty rooms to the one side and the workshop Troy found on the other side. They walked down the hallway next to the workshop and stopped just outside of a door. Troy looked at the end of the hallway to his left when his nose picked up a familiar, foul scent.

“Th-this is Luger’s room,” Luger said nervously.

“Can I see it?” Troy asked through the communicator.

Luger squeaked in shock - or something - and started shaking as he looked around nervously.

“Don’t be shy. I’m not asking to sleep here or anything.”

Troy cringed and wished he could undo the last five seconds. That wasn’t an appropriate thing to say when he was still unsure of Luger’s sexuality or his feelings toward him. Troy hoped he took it as a friend hinting at a sleepover and not as a potential mate. It was hard to communicate intent through a monotone, robotic-voiced communicator.

“La-la-Luger ha-hasn’t g-gleaned it...so,” Luger stammered as he nervously trembled and looked at the floor. He seemed to have an idea and began to press his hands against Troy to turn him. “Don’t loog! Luger will hurry!”

Troy didn’t know what all the fuss was about. It wasn’t like he cared how Luger lived. He was a young man after all. Troy was one once. Besides, he knew how he left the small manufactured home he lived in. A bit of a mess wouldn’t bother him. Despite that, he gave in and turned away from the door.

Troy heard the young buck tap the button to open the room and tapped the button on the inside to close the door. Troy heard bangs and crashes from inside the room.

“Is he hiding a pornography stash in there? Whatever it is can’t be *that* bad,” Troy thought as he turned and raised his hand to the door control.

The door opened to reveal a very dimly lit room. Luger squealed in fright as he stood by his bed with a severely damaged pillow in his hands. As Troy looked closer, *everything* about his bed was ruined and pieced back together. Tracks of sewing repairs lined the dirty pillow cover and all over the dirty sheets. It *smelled* dirty in here. A strong hit of Luger’s essence slammed into Troy’s nostrils like he’d been punched in the face

with it. Troy clenched his teeth together, flexed his stomach muscles, and clenched a fist to prevent himself from getting lost in that kind of stupor again.

Troy stepped inside the room and allowed his eyes to adjust. After blinking several times, it seemed the whole room lit up as if he could see everything. It was nearly devoid of color - like black, white, and gray - but he could see *everything*.

"There's no way these are my eyes. That light was really dim, yet I can see perfectly. I think the doctor missed something," Troy thought as he looked around.

The couch in the room was covered in lines of stitching. The stuffed rabbit tucked in the crook of the arm and the back of the couch had been repaired, too, but it didn't look to be new repairs. The television looked old and had a crack in the upper corner. The closet had a door missing and the other door had only one hinge on the top holding it up. There were only a few things hanging up inside of it. They didn't look like dress clothes. It made him wonder why they were hung up. The dresser was missing nearly all the knobs and the drawers were all partly open. The bottom drawer face was hanging off the rest of the drawer. There didn't appear to be anything inside of it. There weren't too many articles of clothing inside *any* of the drawers he could see in. The room was otherwise empty. It felt like a storage room with ruined/discarded items nobody wanted. He returned his focus to the bed. Luger threw the pillow to the head of the bed to cover up a gaping hole that had stuffing and a spring poking out of it. Troy began to slowly walk up to the bed. He didn't want to offend Luger, but he *had* to cover his nose. The smell was even worse coming off the bed.

"Muh...Masder...Troy...please...don't," Luger stammered out quietly - his voice trembling as hard as he was and sounding like he was about to burst out in tears at any moment.

Troy reached out and lifted the pillow with one hand and the sheet and blanket in the other. *Everything* was covered in stitches. The small drawer in the disheveled stand next to the bed caught his eye. The drawer was slightly open with a needle and several spools of thread inside. Troy set the pillow off to the side on top of the sheet and blanket, then reached down to the bed cover.

"Masder Troy! Stoppit!" Luger cried out and lunged for Troy's arm.

Troy caught him in both arms and held his head against his chest as he reached down again. Luger cried out as he strained to reach for and tug at Troy's arm.

"Stop, Masder Troy! PLEASE! DON'T! STOP!" Luger wailed.

Troy slowly lifted the fitted sheet and pulled it to the side. There was hardly *any* of the original mattress cover left. Bits of scrap cloth covered most of where there weren't any stitches.

"What the what?" Troy thought as he looked over Luger's disheveled bedding again.

Luger sobbed uncontrollably in Troy's chest as his hands gripped and pulled at the back of his shirt.

"Luger...can't...stop it...Masder...Troy...I..."

Troy reached his free arm around to Luger's back and hugged his crying friend. He brought his nose down and planted it between Luger's horns while breathing deep. He did his best to drown out the smell in the room with the fragrance of the body wash and conditioner. He couldn't do much to stop his pounding heart, the heat rising within him, or the prickly feeling over his skin. He bit his lip every time his thoughts escaped him and squeezed his eyes shut every time they began to flutter and wander up. The smell in the room with the feeling of a body next to his was making it very difficult to be a platonic friend right now. He hated the lack of control over his own body, but he didn't have a choice. He *had* to be there for his friend right now.

Troy tried to focus on moving his hands over Luger's head, ear, and upper back. He even tried to make it into a sort of game by not repeating the same motions to keep his mind occupied. *Anything* to keep his mind from wandering. His eyes did wander back to the bed. He fought off a lewd thought and looked back down at the fur in front of him.

"What happened here, Luger?" Troy's eyes traveled up to Luger's horns. "I don't have to think too hard about it, I suppose."

Troy squeezed his eyes shut and shoved the thought of grabbing those horns and directing them towards...

"Troy," Luger said quietly.

Troy almost kissed him for pulling him out of that thought chain. He pulled away from the young man and looked into his red, puffy eyes. Luger stared back and began to tremble before looking ahead into Troy's chest.

"I...shouldn't have brought you here. This was a mistake."

Troy pulled the communicator out of his pocket and typed.

"Luger, do you want to stay at my place for a bit." Troy thought about the implications that might arise and elaborated. "Just for a bit. Maybe tomorrow we can go and see about getting you a new bed and covers."

Luger looked up at Troy. His smile showed excitement. However, his eyes seemed to be begging him to take him away from this place. He looked away and began fiddling with his fingers over his stomach.

"I don't want to bother you. Lucca...doesn't...eg-zagly..."

Troy brought his finger up to silence him. Luger's eyes looked up. He looked so...troubled.

"It's fine," Troy typed into the communicator and smiled at him. "Let's get some food and we can sleep it off in my room. I'll even let you have the bed."

Luger's lips began to tremble. He looked away and back to Troy several times.

"O-gay. But...Luger...probably shouldn't..."

Troy shushed him again. Luger looked up as Troy slowly shook his head, then nodded towards the door.

"Come on. Let's go," Troy typed into the keypad, then tucked the communicator in his pocket.

Troy placed his hand on the young buck's back and nudged him forward. Luger slowly walked towards the door. As he did, Troy took the opportunity to fix his bed for him.

(Author's note: TW: Cutting. Please skip to the next note if you are sensitive to this type of material.)

Troy reached over, grabbed the pillow, and placed it back by the head of the bed. He reached down and grabbed the sheet to tuck it back in under the mattress. His fingers touched something hard that moved. Curious, he lifted the mattress. Part of him

wished he hadn't when his eyes passed over a small knife with dried blood on the blade.

"What the fuck, Luger!?" He thought as he slowly dropped the edge of the mattress. Troy felt a lump rise in his throat and it felt like he got kicked in the chest. He glanced over his shoulder at the gazelle slowly moving out into the hallway. "I'm not letting you come back here. Not like this. I'm definitely not letting you out of my sight."

Troy moved over and lifted the sheet and blanket. There was dried blood on the edge of the bed near the middle of the mattress. His eyes began to water and his gut wrenched. He slowly lifted the sheet towards the pillow to cover the mess, then carefully pulled the blanket up to match it. He took a moment to compose himself before turning around and following Luger out of the room. He took a second and glanced back at the bed before turning the light off and closing the room behind them.

(Author's note: All clear. Please try to enjoy the rest of the chapter.)

Troy's eyes fixed on the young man as he stood in the hallway. He looked so defeated. Exhausted. Troy didn't feel like he was properly trained to handle this. He'd read articles on the topic for his psychology course, but he'd never experienced it. Right now, he just wanted to hug the broken husk in front of him until he smiled and never stopped. Troy looked down at his hands as he brought them up in front of him. They were trembling.

"I don't...I can't," he thought as he watched his hands tremble harder.

"Troy?" Luger said as his hand came into view.

Luger slowly placed his hand into Troy's. Troy stopped trembling and looked over at the young man. The corners of Luger's mouth quivered as he tried to maintain a smile. His eyes looked so full of pain.

"Troy must be hungry. Luger sometimes shags when he's hungry," Luger said kindly - his tone contradicting everything about his expression.

Troy glanced from Luger's hand, then back up to his face. He nodded and slipped his fingers around Luger's thin hand. He stepped to stand on Luger's side and began to slowly walk with the young man.

Troy did his best to hide his face from Luger as they walked. The lump in his throat and chest carried on down the hallway toward the cafeteria. He quickly wiped

away a tear that had fallen from his watering eyes. Luger glanced over, but Troy just smiled and looked back ahead.

“Thang you, Troy,” Luger said quietly after a while and gently squeezed Troy’s hand.

Troy looked over at him. Luger stared ahead - seemingly lost in his thoughts - and continued to walk. After a few intersections, he did have a slight smile on his face and he didn’t look so overwhelmed with sadness. Troy glanced back over at him several times until they got to the intersection that turned to the cafeteria. He was slowly changing back into the Luger he knew.

“Luger wants to stop somewhere first. This place galms Luger for some reason,” Luger said and let go of Troy’s hand.

Luger went down the hallway to the left and stopped. Troy thought it was just another storage room over there. Luger stood in front of a set of wooden double doors. They looked like something straight out of a pre-technology era with iron studs, straps, handles, and hinges. Luger grabbed a handle and pushed the door in. A musty odor came from within. Troy walked over, stood outside the door, and looked in. There was an eerie light coming from within. Lit candles lined the room and a soft light came from recessed lights in the ceiling.

“Is this...a church?” He wondered as his eyes adjusted and scanned over a chapel-like setting.

Wooden pews lined each side of the room with a small gathering of various manimals sitting in them. Some were quietly talking, some were reading a book, and others were knelt down in prayer. The room was lined with tapestries and hand drawn posters depicting events he swore he’d seen before. The far end of the room had a pair of large statues. It was hard to take in the details from this far away.

Troy stepped into the room behind Luger and looked around. Behind him and to the right was a refreshment stand with drinks, cookies, and other small baked goods. To the left was something like a shrine. A small statue was in the wall recess above a table lined with drawings, carvings, and other hand-crafted items as well as notes and letters. Some of the idle chatter stopped and the manimals looked over at them as they walked to the front. Just looked. They didn’t glare or make snide comments like he was used to. They seemed...welcoming...if anything.

A robed figure with the hood drawn over its head turned to look over at them. The muzzle that stuck out from the large hood smiled as it brought its hands up and touched something on its wrist. It appeared to be male, but the clothing made it difficult to discern. It reached over and pulled a rope hanging by its shoulder. As it pulled, the curtain to its side began to open. After a moment, a manimal walked out from the curtained room and looked over at the pair. A few seconds later, another manimal walked out and looked over as well.

The first manimal was an old, grizzled canine that looked to be a Saint Bernard - droopy jowls and all. He had a grayed black muzzle with brown spots on white fur. He wore a light-colored robe with various ornamental embroidery and had a single golden rope hanging around his neck and down the front. The second manimal that followed appeared to be a red bird - like a Cardinal. He had a weathered orange beak, black face, and faded red feathers around his face and head. He wore a darker blue robe with very elaborate embroidery and several golden ropes around his neck that hung down the front.

The bird man moved in between the statues and stood next to a lectern while holding his hands out in front of him. "Welcome, friends, to the Temple of the Winged Savior," his slightly higher pitched voice called out.

Troy looked back in disbelief. "Are...you...*serious* with this crap?"

Troy looked up at the statues. The one on the left was of a human wearing normal clothing. The one on the right was of a winged wolf wearing denim shorts with a belt. All of their details were accurate for being statues, but neither of them had a face - just a smooth surface with slight details where the eyes, nose, and mouth should be. He looked back at the bird man with a disinterested expression.

He thought with a venomous tone. "That winged wolf has a temple dedicated to him? And it's run by a "*Saint*" Bernard and a "*Cardinal*?" How pretentious and outwardly, outrageously full of yourself can you get?"

"Ah...a returning face that has been gone for far too long," the old bird spoke to Luger - his voice turning raspy towards the end as if out of breath. He looked at Troy. "And a new face. One unlike the others, yet so familiar."

Troy had to wonder if he had wings on his back like the statue of the winged wolf man. Most movies depicted them that way, but there were some that had the wings as part of their arms. Judging by the length of his arm and the way it was constructed, Troy assumed the former.

The bird man slowly brought down his left arm and motioned to his right. "The Temple of the Winged Savior is the home of the man with two faces." He raised his left while bringing down the right as if to motion to his left. "Two bodies." He raised his right hand and brought them together in a large fist. "One heart." The man brought the fist down in front of his stomach. "The closest to a God as any of us have come to place our eyes on. A sort of...Archangel whom darkness has claimed, yet acts as a beacon of light - a pathfinder for lost souls. Souls so broken and lost that he sends visions and dreams for he, like I, *know* they can be saved."

Despite the load of crap Troy felt enter his ears, he couldn't help his skin from prickling. He glanced up at the statues again. Much like the faces before him, he couldn't seem to picture what he looked like. It was like the image was *right there*...but it wasn't at the same time. He stared at them as his face scrunched in thought.

"Ah!" The old bird exclaimed, raising a finger to point at the ceiling, causing Troy to look at him. "It seems a new member has joined the collection of the saved. The band of broken. Etcetera...Etcetera," the bird man said and finished by glancing to the side while spinning his finger while pulling it back down in front of him. He pointed at Troy with the digit. "You, too, have seen him."

Troy nodded.

"Spoken with him."

Again, Troy felt compelled to nod.

"Seen the transformation!"

More nodding.

The old bird raised his hand by his beak and spoke in a hushed tone. "Had the sonova bitch scare you so bad you ran."

Troy hesitated as his expression soured with the recalled memory, then nodded.

The old bird brought his hand down in front of his stomach and clasped his fingers together once more. "Met his followers, friends, and...lovers. Felt equally drawn to and afraid of him - equally skeptic and intrigued, yet willing to do as he asked or said in the name of good. Smelled the sulfur, the sickly sweetness, and the fresh earth..."

Troy felt the nodding wasn't necessary as the old bird seemed to have drifted off into another realm. The old bird was looking beyond him - perhaps *through* him - at this point with his beak slightly open. Troy felt that it was like watching a documentary interview from one of the great wars where the speaker would drift off as if the days reenacted themselves in their heads.

"Sometimes I think I can see his face once more," the old bird finally spoke softly. "But I always hear the words he said to me. Cryptic. So very cryptic, yet somehow very clear." The old bird focused on Troy again. "We come here to give our thanks to him for aiding us on our journey," he said as he spread his hands and moved them as if presenting the room.

He reached over with his right hand and grabbed a large, thick book. It had yellow-edged pages bound in a thin leather cover.

"This book contains many stories from a God worshipped long ago - before the greatest war ended our planet. Some passages contain words to live by. Some stories contain miraculous feats." The old bird let the book fall to the lectern with a loud *thud*. "Most of it pure rubbish," the old bird said bitterly. "It gave the people a false hope of a glorious afterlife on one page," he said as he raised his palms towards the ceiling while looking up. He let his hands and eyes drop to the floor. "And doomed them to eternal damnation the next." He returned his hands to his stomach as he slowly moved behind the lectern. "The man in the stories never came to save them...save *us*." The bird man stood behind the lectern and raised his hands out to his sides. "But he," he bellowed. "Guided a man that saved us and shaped us into the Furrries, Scalies, Cetaceans, Avians, and so on that you see before you." He placed his hands on the edges of the lectern. "The people that we are."

Troy glanced over at Luger. He was absorbed and completely enamored with the preacher's words with that infectious smile as he held his loose fists up to his chest.

"Those others...those that look like us," he growled and picked up the book. "Reek of this!" He exclaimed while shaking the book, then dropped it again. He returned his hand to the edge of the lectern, but held the same ferocity. "Malicious tyranny, disgusting bigotry, pure evil, and vile corruption are all they know," he quietly growled.

He seemed to bow his head and regained his composure. He looked back up with a kinder expression. "My boys, we don't follow such divisive malevolence," he said kindly and reached down to pull out a different book.

This book was much larger. It looked like it was hand-crafted with thick leather and had a strap and buckle that closed it. Troy's grandmother had one this size that she used to keep mementos and pictures in.

"You are welcome here anytime to read *our* book," he said as he looked fondly at it, then turned back to look at Troy. "It is filled with the stories of those before us and those among us. Stories of their encounters with the Winged Savior and what was said to them." He placed the book gently down on the lectern and placed his hands on the edges. "Some have left drawings and descriptions of him." He raised a hand and waved it around the room. "You can see the larger pieces around you." He returned his hand to the lectern. "Whether you seek guidance, wish to share your message, or," he said as he tapped the book, then motioned to the open curtain, "Come speak with myself, Hiyuu, or my fellow member, Santo," he said and the canine bowed slightly. "We can speak in private if you have any grievances, concerns, or otherwise. Strictly confidential, of course," he said and closed his eyes with a nod. He placed his hands back on the lectern. "Though I cannot guarantee my advice will repair what is broken, through due diligence, I will try to find a way." He brought his right hand over his heart and spoke in earnest. "I do hope you interpret this old man's ramblings as passion opposed to preaching. We are not like the churches and temples of old. Our words give direction, not precedent." He returned his hand to the lectern. "You look weary, my sons. Perhaps another day. And, again, you are welcome anytime."

After a moment, Luger cleared his throat, bowed slightly, and said, "Thang you, Masder Hiyuu."

The old bird chuckled as he raised his hand. "No no no, young one. I am not your master. I am but a humble servant here to aid those in need."

Hiyuu placed his hand back on the lectern as he looked over at Troy. Troy looked up at the statues once more, then down at the communicator.

"Thank you," the speaker conveyed as Troy nodded.

Though his beak lacked a smile, his eyes did the smiling while he slowly nodded, then turned to return to the back room with Santo.

Troy led the way out of the large room and stood outside as Luger closed the door. Luger looked up at Troy with a gleam in his eyes and a wide smile.

"Thang you for gu-ming with me, Troy," Luger said sweetly.

"You're welcome," Troy typed into the communicator and smiled.

Luger looked away. "Luger used to go all the time, but," he said, drifting off. He looked back up at Troy and held out his hand. "Food first," he said and smiled brightly.

Troy agreed. It was well past time to eat. Though, he felt he needed to say something first.

"Luger," Troy typed into the keypad. "I'm so sorry for raising my hand to you earlier. It was a reflex. I really didn't mean to."

Troy looked up from the communicator as Luger sighed. Luger scrunched his face to a bit of a serious expression.

"Food...first," Luger stated plainly with a hint of authority, then softened his expression and smiled.

"Can't argue with that," Troy thought as he took Luger's hand and they walked towards the cafeteria. "I wouldn't feel this hungry if I'd been allowed to eat in peace before all this happened."