

The Keeper

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Everybody thinks that the Old Town in the woods outside the city is burned down and abandoned. Matt Reed, in a desperate struggle to escape his own life, learns otherwise. [Future shounen-ai]

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Chapter 1 - In the Woods	2
Chapter 2 - The Librarian's Tail	8
Chapter 3 - An Open Window	14

1 - In the Woods

So I ended up getting something good out of all the paaaaaaain of school work XD

1. This is a shounen-ai story (those of you who know me could have predicted it >_>). Don't like, don't read. Very, very simple. And don't flame the story based on this aspect; your comment will just be deleted.
 2. I'm going to try and update as often as possible (with Christmas Break creeping around the corner, it shouldn't be too long ^^).
 3. Reviews are much appreciated ^^ even if it's constructive criticism.
- ~Sei-chan

The Keeper
by V. Gainsborough

He lit the solitary oil lamp on the nightstand, pushing aside the crumpled papers to make room for the small pitcher of cold water. He took the cloth he had laid across the woman's forehead and immersed it in the pitcher again. She had her eyes shut tight but smiled up at him warmly. He returned it, reaching out to gently touch her cheek; she felt feverish. Wringing out the cool cloth, he replaced it on her head, dabbing lightly at some beads of sweat that had accumulated there.

"I'm sorry I can't stay with you any longer, my dear," she murmured, suddenly turning sullen. The boy looked downcast, knowing she wouldn't last the night, despite how well she had resisted succumbing to the sickness in the past. His smile withered and saddened as he shook his head.

"You don't need to apologize, Miss. I know that it's merely human fate." The lamp flickered, sending the shadows dancing across the walls and their faces as they basked in the comforting silence and each other's company. She opened her mouth to speak moments later, her eyebrows knitted in concern and hesitation.

"You won't let anything bad happen to--"

"No, of course not," the boy replied, shaking his head. He took her hand in reassurance, trying to ignore how unnaturally cool it felt in his grip. "You've taught me better than that."

Her eyes slowly slid open, looking forlornly at him. "I have, haven't I?" she chuckled, which slowly turned into a raspy cough. It pained him to see his pillar of strength reduced to something so weak. As her eyes slid shut again, he squeezed her hand and whispered:

"I won't ever leave them. I promise you."

"Matt, I can't figure this out!" his sister cried through his bedroom door, which he had locked for privacy. He wasn't sure when he began doing it, but it had become more habitual lately. Matt Reed put down the comic he was reading and opened the door. Velia, though five years younger than him, was starting to catch up to him in height. He noticed this because of the close proximity of the harsh glare she was giving him now. "Why did you lock the door? Are you doing something naughty in there?" she asked him, smirking gleefully.

Matt flushed. "I wasn't. And I thought you said you needed my help."

"I didn't say that; I just said I couldn't figure out this problem!" Velia whined, holding her math workbook hardly an inch in front of her brother's nose. He shoved it out of the way.

"I hope you don't expect me to do it for you, Vell."

"No, I know you better than that. Just let me in." He relented and moved out of the doorframe. Velia bounded into his room and launched herself onto the bed, landing amongst the wildly strewn sheets. Matt took a seat at his desk, turning the chair so he was facing his sister on the bed.

"What are you studying now?"

"Quadratic equations."

"In 7th grade?"

"Don't go on about how much sooner you learned them and help me, Matt," she replied, tapping her pencil noiselessly against his pillow. Matt sighed and flipped through her workbook. He wouldn't really call himself a math prodigy...mainly because if he did, his circle of friends would certainly lose its shape and eventually dissipate into a single point. He cringed internally at this. Even his metaphors for friendship were mathematic in nature!

"Here's where you screwed up. Before you do the square root, you take the opposite of the "b" value. You didn't change this to a negative." He handed the workbook back to Velia, with a circle around her error. Before taking her eraser to correct it, she quickly skimmed the rest of the problems she had done and sighed.

"Oh, jeez...then I messed up *these* problems, too," she groaned, letting her head slump onto the bed in exasperation. "How did you survive middle school, Matt?"

"Barely," Matt quipped, "it's one of the worst times in the 12 years of education before college. Your only consolation is that it doesn't last forever."

"How very philosophical of you," she mumbled, the sarcasm evident even through the fabric of the comforter on his bed. "How is that supposed to make me feel better, big brother?"

Matt raised his hands as if under accusation and grinned. "I wasn't aware that I was meant to be making you feel better. I was simply answering your question." He grabbed the comic he was reading and flung it at Velia. She, facedown on the bed, made an easy target and the book connected with her head. "Get out, you lazy bum, and go do the rest of your damn homework."

"Hey! I'm gonna tell Mom you swore in front of me!" Velia taunted, racing out of the room and right for the stairs. Matt sighed and ran after her, even though he knew his mom couldn't care less about something like swearing.

He wasn't exactly anticipating going to school the following day. He hadn't gotten much sleep due to studying, and he was feeling more lethargic than usual. Possibly too lethargic to hold up both his real visage and the one he had created for himself to keep his oldest friends.

"Yo, Reed. Have you seen Caitlin today? She's not here," one of the friends he made by showing his real self came up to him before class. He held two Styrofoam coffee cups in hand and set one down in front of Matt, sipping from his own.

"Haven't seen or heard from her since yesterday," Matt replied, not looking up from his manga, "Maybe she's sick or something. She mentioned having a headache on the walk home." So Caitlin, his real best friend, wasn't here today. *That means I can probably go hang out with Mag and the others in the Old Town Woods after school.*

"Is that the latest one?" his friend, named Alex, glanced over Matt's shoulder to examine the comic he was reading.

"The series has been over for a while now, but no. This is the fifth out of eight."

"I can't believe you have the guts to read all that subtexty shoot. It's for chicks!"

"Subtext is just subtext, Alex; it can be ignored. I like the artist's style and the supernatural element."

"Three guys who constantly get their asses kicked and kidnapped, and just happen to be a post-cog, an aura reader, and some freaky white mage wannabe. Sounds like a great read." (1)

"Don't knock my tastes in reading. I read violent stuff too, you know."

Before Alex could argue this point anymore, the bell rang, signaling the students to head to their homeroom classes. Alex grabbed his now empty coffee cup and chucked it haphazardly at a garbage can a few feet away, disappearing into the sea of students before Matt could tell him he'd missed the can by a mile. Matt sighed, picked up the crumpled Styrofoam and tossed it into the can, succeeding this time. He gathered his books and set off, tucking the comic into the deepest possible compartment of his bag.

Stuffing his books in his bag as best he could, Matt ran outside to catch up to his friends, who were already shouting for him to hurry up. Darting past parents' cars and other student's (and narrowly avoiding getting hit by a metallic blue minivan), he reached the hill where his friends were waiting. It was from here they started their trek.

Mag, Rave and Ezil had been friends of Matt's since elementary school; they maintained their friendship throughout those years. During that time, a more innocent and carefree time, Matt had felt more at ease with a small group of friends than he was with middle school. It was amidst these years that they began to drift apart.

No, Matt quickly amended himself. *It was more like I drifted from them. Like a wolf in sheep's clothing, I just tried to blend in with their changing interests.* He sighed and fixed his gaze to the twigs and leaves crackling and receding beneath his shoes as he trudged further into the woods beside Rave.

"The hell was with that, Matt?" Rave asked, raising an eyebrow.

He blinked. "The hell was what?"

"What was up with that huge sigh you just let out? Tired already, Princess?" Rave snickered, giving his friend's right arm a light punch. Well, what he thought to be a light punch. Matt rolled his eyes and mumbled a quick "shut up," rubbing the targeted arm tenderly.

"Rave, chill. And hurry the hell up, you two! We don't have all the freaking time in the world!" Mag shouted to them, pointing to their usual spot beneath a particularly large tree. He delved his hand into a knot near the base and produced a pack of cigarettes, taking out four and replacing the pack inside the tree.

"God, I hate this forest. Smells disgusting," Ezil grumbled, lighting his cigarette and brushing a sandy blonde lock out of his eyes.

"You do realize the irony of you saying that while smoking, right?"

"Shut up, Matt," Ezil tossed Matt the lighter, a little more forcefully than necessary. He flicked it open and lit the cigarette, just letting it hang from his mouth for a moment as he stared blankly out at the forest.

"This forest smells bad cause most of the buildings got torched a while back, remember? Mostly houses and shoot, nothing important. Old Town's abandoned, anyway," Mag told Ezil, taking a long drag from his cigarette. "The fire department made our school hold an assembly on the dangers of having open flames in a wooded area and blah, blah, blah..." he pretended to gag in accordance to his trailing off.

Ezil cringed. "Oh, yeah. I skipped out on that. I haven't attended a school assembly since 8th grade graduation, man."

"It's a wonder you even got invited to that one!" Rave sniggered, flicking some ashes at the blonde. Ezil just glared at him and swiped at his hair.

Matt had become a wallflower when he hung out with these three. *I don't connect to them. I don't want to*

break rules; I just want to go through my life like a damn normal kid. Is that so much to ask?! He'd been trying to tear himself away from Mag - his closest friend of the three - for a while now, but he just couldn't bring himself to. Like...he wasn't ready to give up the daunting task of managing two circles of friends.

He reminded himself of everything he and Mag had done as kids...they were inseparable. Catching frogs at the creek near Mag's old house, spending whole summer vacations at each others houses, wrestling over video game controllers, camping out in each other's backyards, swearing they would be friends forever... It seemed so distant to Matt, comparing that Mag to the person he was now. Unkempt blonde hair with faded red dye barely clinging to life at the ends; practically black eyes that seemed fairly easy to drown in. Matt, however, had done nothing except cut his reddish-brown hair, letting it fall to chin length. Mag had had a growth spurt early in middle school and now was slowly creeping over six feet tall (Matt and Ezil lagged at around 5'7", Rave slowly catching up to Mag at 5'10"). All in all, one of the most intimidating people at Day Town High School.

Why was he even hanging out with him now? Matt couldn't figure it out. The cigarette still hung limp in his mouth, a single tendril of smoke spiraling from the ember tip.

"Yo Matt, you still in there? Matt!!" Ezil waved a hand in front of Matt's face, threatening to swipe the cigarette out of his mouth. Matt bit down hard enough on the end to keep it in place.

"Y-Yeah, I'm fine," he muttered. He ran his fingers through his hair and sighed. "Guys, I'm gonna head back."

"What, already, Matt? Total mood kill, man," Rave said, staring at Matt as if he had some monstrous mutation.

"Shut up. I'll see ya tomorrow." Matt trudged off towards home, not looking back.

When he thought he had gotten far enough away, he veered from his home and walked on, to Old Town.

Ever since the fires a few years back, the forest surrounding Old Town had retained a rather gloomy appearance, as if time had suspended around those fires. Like Ezil had pointed out, it did have a smoky scent, especially heightened when it rained. Matt had once made a promise to himself that he'd come here during the rainy season, just so he could know what it felt like to be in the middle of the Old Town Woods, submersed in the rain and smoke.

There was nothing of great import in this forest; though Matt could admit that he hadn't seen much of Old Town in it's time. He didn't know anybody who lived there, nor did he ever even visit it. Hell, as far as he knew, the place was nothing but rubble! Matt knew that parts of the town did have great historical merit that none of his friends - real or fake - would particularly care about.

Velia had always been interested in the idea of the town, and wanted to go there on her own when she was old enough. Matt had insisted that it was too dangerous to go into the Old Town Woods by herself, knowing firsthand what punks could be lurking out there, just waiting for a lone female to lose her way.

He wandered aimlessly for a long time, his gaze fixed on his own shoes. His thought process was interrupted, however, by a looming shadow that caught his eye. He looked up and was caught off guard by two very palpable facts:

He was in a part of the woods that he didn't recognize, and the shadow at his feet came from a large building atop a solitary hill.

"What the...hell?" Matt blinked for a few moments, as if unsure if the building was real or a mirage. Against his better judgment - and the time on his watch, which now read 5:30 - he decided to investigate it himself and trudged up the hill.

The building was clearly abandoned, judging by the thickness of the dirt and grime that had collected on the large windows. Almost all of the bricks that made up its structure were chipped or cracked. "What kind of building is this?" Matt wondered aloud, squinting through the smudged windows. All he could see were giant...cases? Huge monoliths, arranged in large aisles. An old market, maybe? No...The place was too big. Matt suddenly realized what it was and grinned.

"...It's a library." He glanced around the sides of the building. "The door's probably locked. I wonder if there's another way in..."

He scaled his way around the library, examining the bricks and the windows carefully. The place looked tomb-tight from the side and back, but he finally found a broken window on the right side. *Perfect. I should be able to slip in. I wonder if there are any books left in there.* He shook his head and chided himself. *The owner probably just relocated and took the books with them. Oh, well. It's not like it could hurt to check the place out.* All Matt figured that was probably left were some old papers, bookshelves, and maybe some beer cans and discarded cigarettes from other delinquents who had broken in. Probably the ones who broke this window in the first place.

Matt carefully wrapped his fingers around the windowsill and hoisted himself off the ground, forcing his foot up onto the sill. Minding the glass that still clung to the edges, he crouched on the ledge and leapt through to the other side.

Yes, I'm going to be evil and leave it there o_o I am the mistress of evil cliffhangers!
So, there it is! ^^ What do you think? Good? Bad? Too emo? >_>; Reviews welcomed!

(1) - Virtual cookie and a plushie of your choice to whoever knows what manga Matt is reading ^^

2 - The Librarian's Tail

...God, I **hate** this chapter title XD

Chapter 2! Enjoy ^^ I went through hell to get this chapter up X_x but it's here now XD

1) I just realized that the whole helping sister with quadratic equations thing happened in *Death Note* (it was even the same thing she was asking help for X_x) THIS WASN'T INTENTIONAL, I SWEAR! I only realized it when I watched the anime O_o

2) While we're talking about *Death Note*, it's awesome. If you haven't read it, go buy it. Like, right now. Go.

3) '80s music doesn't get the love it deserves.

~Sei-chan

Matt's leap from the windowsill to the library floor raised a rather large cloud of dust. His leap was also far from graceful, landing him almost completely flat on his back.

"Ohhh..." he moaned to himself, the fall stunning him momentarily before he pushed himself up onto his elbows and glanced around.

It was as he'd predicted: the building was an old library. The window he had climbed in through was in the aisle formed by two large bookcases. The dust from his fall had, unfortunately, gotten in his eyes, causing them to tear up greatly. Matt swiped at his face a few times and blinked.

His eyes then widened in shock when he realized that the shelves were filled. *This place is obviously abandoned! How could there still be books here?!* Matt stood right up and examined the books, picking out one novel.

They were definitely legitimate. Old and pretty worn, yes, but real. Upon closer examination, Matt found the book he had picked to be an old copy of *Anna and the King of Siam*. He glanced around a few times, and then flipped it open.

Why did I just do that? I'm the only person here; of course I can read this privately. Still glancing around suspiciously, he searched for somewhere to sit down and read. He stepped out of the aisle he was in and actually got a good look around the library.

There were definitely more bookshelves than he had anticipated, maybe about fifty or sixty, all carefully aligned to form aisles. At first he thought maybe the owner had only omitted a few shelves, but no. Upon closer inspection he realized that the library was still full of books. As if the only thing that left was the owner. Everything else was completely in order: the desk, the tables, the computers...nothing was out of place.

The tables were worn and a bit dusty, but still sturdy. Matt pulled up one of the chairs and began to read.

It wasn't long before he'd lost track of time (since the only clock in the library, above the front entryway, was broken) and had quickly plowed through a hefty pile of books.

It was quiet here, and he liked it this way. But...

"Something doesn't feel right," Matt mused aloud, setting *The Da Vinci Code* down and rising from his chair. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, since it was only a feeling that brought on his paranoia. Anything out of the ordinary, he surmised.

Then again, what wasn't out of the ordinary about a completely full, abandoned library?

Matt shrugged to himself and looked around again. He eyed the computer sitting idly on what used to be a checkout desk. *Maybe there are still records; I can see when this place shut down.* He walked over to the computer, fumbling around the monitor to find a button or switch to turn it on.

It took him a moment to come to a revelation, and he froze.

The monitor was warm.

Somebody used this computer recently. He pressed the palm of his hand gently against the monitor. "Judging by the heat I'd say about an hour or two ago," he said quietly to himself in a calculating way.

It was at this point that Matt truly began to feel that he was not alone. The almost silent rattling of wind against the windowpane caused him to whip his head around. Another noise brought his head whipping back around so quickly he felt dizzy.

But this noise was different.

A faint shuffling of papers.

As if someone had walked through them.

"Hello?! Is someone there?" he called loudly, finally unable to sit still. There was no spoken response, but that same shuffling again, farther away this time. Maybe up the old wooden staircase on the far end of the library.

Whoever was there was hiding from Matt. Or running from him; it made no difference. Matt was curious now, and so chose to trudge up the stairs and follow the noise. He had given up hope of sneaking upstairs, since the boards creaked under even the slightest strain.

By the time he reached the top of the stairs, he noticed how oddly dark it was. How...very damn dark it was. Were there really so few windows on the second floor, or had he really been inside the library for that long? He moved forward haphazardly, afraid to crash into something and possibly injure himself, potentially ruining any chance he had of discovering the identity of his fellow intruder.

Ugh. My kingdom for a flashlight, Matt said to himself in exasperation, groping blindly against the wall and moving forward. He felt his feet brush across scattered papers and the occasional aluminum can, but nothing extremely out of place.

Until he stepped on something that coerced a painful and unfamiliar cry. He had stepped on something slender, firm, and...furry?

"What the--?!" The shock sent him hurtling backwards, back onto the floor in a similar fashion to how he had entered the library. The apparent pain that the other figure felt sent them to the floor as well. In the darkness, Matt could make out the faint shadow of a figure nursing something long and slim in his hands.

It was then that Matt saw he had cut his arm on a loose nail in the floorboards, as blood trickled down his skin and into the crook of his elbow when he lifted the injured arm to examine the wound.

"You're hurt."

Matt's head snapped up at the voice. The oddly masculine and yet still timid voice that he assumed came from the boy he'd run into. However, he was not expecting what he saw.

The boy was leaning over him (having stood up moments ago) and glancing at the impressive cut with inquisitive and rather striking green eyes. His hair was long, unkempt, and oddly enough, a rather unnatural-looking pale blonde. It swept over his shoulders and hung freely in the air, but it failed in concealing the two things that caught Matt's eye first and nearly paralyzed him.

The feline ears sticking out of the top of the boy's head. Gray in color, only a slight tint different from his hair, but definitely noticeable. It was then that Matt further deduced (though it seemed shockingly impossible) that he had stepped on the strange boy's tail and caused him to cry out.

"It's nothing, really," Matt replied to the boy's comment, wiping some of the blood trickle away with his fingers. They swept over the wound and it stung, causing him to wince.

"It's something. Don't be stubborn," the boy said sternly, kneeling beside Matt and tearing off a piece of his sleeve with his teeth. As he wound the strip of white cloth around his cut, Matt noticed the strange boy's clothes were...somewhat dated. They looked more as if they belonged on a boy living in a much older time period, possibly 18th or 19th Century. Except for shoes, since he was barefoot.

"You feel fine giving me an order when we just met? I could be older than you," Matt said.

The boy didn't look up from his handiwork, but replied, "I'm probably eighteen. You?"

"*Probably?*" The addition of this word puzzled Matt and took him by surprise, but he didn't let it bother him. "Same here." He grinned a little. Okay, so he was adding a few months on. "This place is closed down, right?" A nod from the boy. "How'd you get in, then? The broken window, too?"

His gray ears perked up slightly at that. "There's a broken window downstairs?"

"You didn't know? Then how did you get in?"

"...I live here."

Okay, the catboy was one thing, but a librarian catboy?!

"Wh-what?! What the hell is this place?!" Matt cried, leaping to his feet, prepared to back down the stairs and run out.

The boy sighed and looked away. "This is an ordinary library. Old and run-down, but there's nothing weird about it. I'm the only strange creature in here." He reached up and grabbed one of his own furry ears. "These aren't fake. I'm the only person like this in this town, maybe even in this country." He paused and caught his lip between his teeth, which Matt noticed were slightly pointed. "Even so, this is my property. This library belongs to me. The Lady of the Books gave it to me."

"Who?" *Why am I even still here asking a cat questions?!*

"My mother," the boy replied simply. "Wait, this isn't any of your business. You're intruding on my property, and I'd like you to leave." He pointed towards the stairs with a clawed finger and allowed the silence to take over again.

Never before was there a more opportune moment for Matt to run and never look back.

He casually let the moment pass, not knowing why at first.

Then he looked more closely at the odd librarian; closely at his eyes, to be more specific. There was a vague sadness in those eyes, as if quietly requesting that he not leave right away.

Matt bit his lip, then cleared his throat. "I-I'm sorry for intruding like this."

"No, please, it's fine."

"Then could I maybe come back here again?" Matt ventured.

The boy's cheeks took on a slight pink tint, but he quickly recovered and glared a little. "And break another window, perhaps?"

"What?! That wasn't me; that window was broken when I came here!" Matt exclaimed, startled by the sudden accusation.

"Even so," the boy leaned in close and sniffed at Matt's jacket, once again surprising him, "you absolutely reek of cigarettes. I don't want that smell or smoke contaminating these books! Some of them are fragile enough!" The boy wrinkled his nose in disgust for effect.

Matt felt exasperated. Just when he thought that he'd finally found a comfortable place, a safe haven where he wouldn't have to worry about Mag, Rave, Ezil, Caitlin, Alex, his teachers or anyone else...just when he'd finally found that place, he got rejected by its owner! However, he resolved to not just give up

so easily. He'd strike some kind of bargain with the cat librarian.

"If the next time I come here, I don't smell like cigarettes, and don't have a single cigarette on me, would you be willing to let me in again?"

The boy paused, and pondered for a moment. Matt could sense that the boy was considering it, but truth be told, the cat was still weighing this idea in his mind. Finally, he spoke again.

"All right, then. I'll let you have this chance," he said, sighing. "But I'll ask you that if you read a book, please just put them back. I like keeping this place in order."

"Keeping it the way it was?"

The boy said nothing to this, and stooped down to clean up some scattered papers to keep himself occupied. Matt just shrugged and finally glanced at his watch. 7:48?!

"shoot! I gotta get home!" he flew down the wooden stairs and bolted for the window when--

"Please!"

Matt turned around just in time to see a small shimmering object thrown at him. He reached out and fumbled with it for a moment before getting a firm grip and examining it in his hand. It was a dusty brass key on a string. The boy stood near the bottom of the stairs and quickly pointed at the large double-doors near the front.

"I-I'm going to be covering that broken window soon. Please use the door," he said shyly, as if nervous to ask that of Matt.

Matt glanced at the key in his hand. "Won't you need this back?"

"I have the original; that one's just a replica."

"Then you're...giving me access to this library?"

The boy blushed again, but not enough for Matt to notice. "F-For the time being, yes. Now, please. You needed to return to your home, right?" The boy headed back up the stairs. At the same time Matt trudged towards the front door; just as he was about to turn the key in the lock, he stopped and turned around.

"Wait, one more thing!"

The boy had reached the top of the stairs again and turned around tentatively to face Matt. Matt swallowed the lump in his throat.

"...My name is Matt. Matt Reed," he said, finally introducing himself since meeting the strange boy.

Said boy flicked his tail and nodded to Matt's introduction. He paused for a moment and looked at the

railing before saying in a barely audible voice,

"I-I'm Stefan." And with that, he darted around the corridor and disappeared.

Stefan...I'll remember that, Matt said to himself, glancing at the makeshift bandage around his arm before pushing the doors open and heading out of the library, out of the woods, back to his home.

The cat makes his appearance! God I love Stefan to death X3 he's such a cutie!

So, will Matt keep his promise? And what will happen once he gets home? Find out in the next chapter of *The Keeper*!

P.S. About *The Da Vinci Code*...I have never read it, nor do I plan to. It's a library, there are books, TDVC is a book, therefore it is in the library. I will be making allusions to several books in the story.

Anna and the King of Siam (c) Margaret Landon

The Da Vinci Code (c) Dan Brown

3 - An Open Window

And this would be chapter 3 for all you lovely people ^^ Enjoy!

- 1) Okay, since nobody guessed it, the manga Matt's reading in chapter 1 is "Hands Off!" Go find it now.
- 2) Got a little more light shed on Matt's family situation here ^^ but there's more to it than what's in this chapter O_o
- 3) Since a couple of my friends have been a little confused about when this story takes place...it's semi-futuristic. The present year is about 2020.

~Sei-chan

Chapter 3: An Open Window

It was almost 9:00 when Matt unlocked the front door to his house and tiptoed into the foyer. It was already dark in both the hallway and the kitchen, so he assumed that his mom and sister had already gone to bed. They had always gone to bed much earlier than Matt ever could; he figured he must have gotten his "night owl" habits from his father.

He peeled off his jacket and hung it on the coat hook near the garage door and carefully untied his shoes. Normally he would have just kicked them off, but he was concerned about the noise he might make. Once the shoes were off, he groped in the darkness for the stair banister, nearly knocking a lamp over in the process.

After what seemed like ages, he had a firm grip on the wooden handrail and climbed the steps he knew so well: five up, then the landing. Turn a corner, and then up six more. He moved at a slow pace, wincing at every creak that he felt seemed louder than when he wasn't trying to sneak upstairs.

Finally he was up the stairs, and he was only a yard or so away from his bedroom when...

"Matt?"

Crap. He turned around, and even though it was still pitch-black, he knew that Velia had called out to him.

"Yeah, it's me, Vel."

The hall light clicked on, temporarily blinding Matt; he shielded his eyes for a second before looking up again. Velia stood at the other end of the hall, in her pajamas, looking rather upset.

"Where were you? Mom and I were really worried! Did you go over to Mag's house or something? You

know Mom gets mad when you don't call before hanging out at a friend's house!" she said in an almost scolding tone. If he wasn't well-aware of the panic he had caused, Matt might have found it cute.

"No, I didn't go to anyone's house. I just wanted to clear my head so I took a walk," Matt replied. "I guess I...lost track of time."

Velia frowned and played with the end of her pajama sleeve. "Well, you still should've called. You know I worry when you don't come home." She sniffled a little and swiped at her eyes.

She sounds just like a wife who's worried about her husband not coming home. Matt's heart melted at seeing his sister so sad and walked over to her, hugging her tightly. "I'm sorry, Vel. That wasn't very smart of me," he said soothingly.

Tears were now flowing freely down her face. "I-I don't want you to leave like Papa did..."

That stung Matt. Their father had left them when he was eleven. Velia was only six at the time, and it had taken a huge toll on her. He even distinctly remembered her calling him "Papa" for five months afterwards; though he deduced that it was mostly based on the fact that he had been named after his father.

"I'm not going to leave. I promise. Okay?" he said, stroking her head fondly and making her look up at him. "Now smile, Vel."

She wiped at her eyes one more time before smiling a little. Matt grinned back and gave her a kiss on the forehead.

"Now get back in bed. You've got school tomorrow," Matt said jokingly, knowing full well that he did as well. Velia nodded and crept back into her room.

Matt turned off the hall light and got into his room, shutting the door behind him. shoot, I still have homework to do, he mentally groaned. *Well, I'm not gonna be getting a lot of sleep tonight. Alex had better have some damn strong coffee for me tomorrow, otherwise I'll never make it through first period.*

"Matt, you haven't been sleeping well lately, have you?"

Matt groaned and looked up from the pillow he had made out of his arms and his bookbag to see his (real) friend Caitlin looking at him worriedly.

"That, my dear, would be an understatement. However did you guess?" he mumbled, wanting nothing more than to sink back into the table and not wake up until next week. He didn't even care if the school janitors poked him with their mops.

Caitlin rolled her eyes. "Well, for one thing, the dark circles under your eyes make you look like a

raccoon."

"Or L," Matt suggested.

"No, MUCH worse than L." (1)

Alex reached their table and put the usual cup of coffee in front of Matt's face. Matt swiped at it clumsily, missing it badly enough that it almost fell over. "If I look like L, then give me something chocolate-frosted and full of sugar already."

"You want more sugar in your coffee, Your Highness?" Alex rolled his eyes. Matt mumbled something that may have been an affirmative response, but Alex just ignored him and took a seat. "Speaking of L, you have any *Death Note* on your persons?" He grabbed Matt's bag and started rummaging through it.

"I just got 8, Alex. Cut me some slack. It's twelve books and I'm short enough on cash as it is," Matt replied, practically inhaling the coffee. He glanced at the clock: 7:57. Three minutes before he had to drag himself to class. Just then, he heard Alex speak up:

"Hey, Matt, what the hell's this key for?"

Matt's head whipped up and he saw it. The brass key dangling from the thin red thread. The key that the strange librarian had given him yesterday. *The library! I made that promise!*

"Oh, it's nothing," he replied, thinking as fast as he could to create an explanation. "I...found that old key in our basement, and my mom said that she got rid of the trunk that it unlocked. I thought I'd keep it. It looks kinda old and cool." Then he shrugged, as if it were the simplest thing.

Alex raised an eyebrow quizzically. "Man, you have some freaky-@\$ interests, Matty." Caitlin, however, didn't seem so easily convinced. She took the key from Alex and looked at it more closely.

"Where was the key?"

"On the floor of my dad's old office."

"...What were you doing in your dad's office?"

Matt hesitated, fearing that Caitlin had caught him. Even though he trusted her and Alex with this kind of secret more than he would have trusted Mag and the others, he wasn't sure if he could tell them this secret so soon. He was barely even sure if it had all really happened or not! Then again, the key was proof that it was true to some extent.

"Am I not allowed to look through my dad's things? It's not like he's using them or anything," he finally replied, actually feeling somewhat bitter.

Caitlin looked down a little, blonde hair falling in front of her face. "Oh, right. Sorry, Matt."

Matt smiled. "Don't worry about it. It bothers Vel more than it does me."

"You worry a lot about your sister. She having problems in school or something?" Alex piped up.

"No, well...not that she's told me about."

"I think if she'd tell anyone about her problems, it's you. She's fine."

"Y-Yeah..."

By the end of the day, Matt had gotten sick of hearing, "Mr. Reed! Sit up straight and pay attention!" from his teachers and was grateful to leave. He was surprisingly happy to be able to visit that library again. Something about it just...sparked his curiosity, and the same could be said for the librarian.

"Stefan..." he let the name slip past just once, as if committing it to memory. Or subconsciously telling the boy that he was going to be there soon. But it wasn't long before he realized that he should probably call home to avoid an incident like yesterday.

He left a quick message on his phone, saying he was going to stay after school to do his homework then walk home, and then opted to turn the cell phone off.

...and then proceeded to dive behind a nearby hedge when he saw Mag, Rave and Ezil walking out of the building into the school parking lot. It was Friday; Rave would probably be driving Mag and Ezil over to one of their houses today! And they'd probably go looking for him! *Dammit dammit dammit...* Matt chanted to himself as he ducked down as low as he possibly could. There was NO way he could use that library or staying at school as an excuse for them!

He managed to keep himself hidden behind the bushes (though he got some odd looks from the people walking down the sidewalk that was parallel to where he crouched) as Mag and the others passed by him, not suspecting a thing. He did, however, hear a fraction of their conversation.

"Hey, guys, you seen Matt today?"

"I saw him between periods, but he's not here now."

"Aww, it doesn't matter. He never comes with us on Fridays anyway."

The rest of their talk faded as they walked past Matt's hedge and towards the parking lot. Matt waited another minute or so before leaping up and making a desperate run for the Old Town Woods.

It was 4:35 when he glanced at his watch again. He had been walking in the woods for well over an hour and still hadn't found the library.

"Where the hell was it?" he asked himself through tightly gritted teeth. "Dammit, I should've made markers or something to remind me where it was!"

"Well, Hansel and Gretel used bread crumbs. Maybe you should use cigarette butts."

Matt practically leapt out of his skin at the second voice. Had Mag and the guys come after all and found him?!

"Kindly turn around, Mr. Reed. You're facing the wrong way."

It was Stefan! Matt whipped his head around and expected to see the young cat boy standing right behind him...but no one was there.

"Uh...St-Stefan?" The boy in question giggled a little at Matt's apparent confusion.

"You're halfway there. Now look up." Matt did so, and found Stefan perching on a tree branch, his tail waving gently behind him. *He acts more like a cat than I figured*, Matt thought with an amused grin. Stefan muttered a small "hmph" and leapt down from the tree branch, landing -- no surprise -- on his feet. "It's this way," he said, pointing off into the woods before walking in that direction. Matt just nodded and followed him

"I'm surprised you came out here, Stefan," Matt admitted. "I thought you didn't like me enough to look for me."

"Just because I hate the smell of those cigarettes you smoke doesn't mean I dislike you, Mr. Reed." The cat didn't even look back, but there was a hint of amusement in his voice. "You don't seem like the kind of person to forget something, so I was, in a way, waiting for you to get lost. You sure don't think these things too far ahead, for someone who..." He trailed off, glancing in some vague direction.

Matt raised an eyebrow at this. What had Stefan been planning to say after that? "Someone who what?" he hazarded a question. Even if Stefan was withholding an insult, Matt didn't care. He was oddly fascinated by Stefan, and curious about what could possibly be going through his head.

Stefan just shook his head a little hastily and replied with, "oh, nothing." And there was a long silence once again as they continued walking into the woods.

We've been here for a while, I should say something, Matt thought after nearly ten more minutes. He cleared his throat, startling the other boy, and asked, "So...can I ask why you decided to give me another shot at this?" He pointed outward (what he thought to be towards the library) to indicate what he meant by "this."

Stefan sighed and shrugged. "To be honest, I'm not entirely sure. You just seem...trustworthy, that's all. Most people that break in or use that window just use it as a place to drink beer without worrying about getting caught by their parents. They ransack the bookshelves, vandalize the books and tables, and just generally mess the place up," he replied, wrinkling his nose. "When I saw you...you came in, and you sat down and read. Nobody's ever done that before."

"You've never been...*injured*, have you?" Matt felt a small shiver course through him when the thought crossed his mind. If those people could do those kinds of things to books without remorse, what would they do to somebody like Stefan?

"Oh, no. When they come I just keep out of sight and clean the place as best I can once they leave. You're the first person to ever find me," the boy in question said. He frowned a little and clenched his fists, his claws digging into his skin. "They're disgusting degenerates. Like they care about anything other than being able to do those sick things without anyone knowing or stopping them."

The other felt his face heat up a little, knowing that he has *befriended* some of those "disgusting degenerates." Even if he didn't like them, he had sticky fingers for even pretending to do so.

"Okay, here we are," Stefan piped up, drawing Matt's attention. Sure enough, they were in front of the hill atop which the library resided. "Try to remember where it is next time, all right, Mr. Reed?" he quipped, smiling and jogging up to the library's front entrance.

Matt didn't bother making a retort and just followed him up the hill. He had made it to the front entrance when Stefan stopped him.

"Uh...aren't we going to go in?" Matt asked, somewhat confused. His bewilderment only increased when the librarian outstretched his arm and presented his palm to Matt in response.

"This is your first test, Mr. Reed," Stefan replied promptly, then asked, "do you have the key?"

A-ha. He's trying to get me before I even walk in the door. Matt smirked to himself and set his bookbag onto the ground, opening the flap to dig around a little. After pushing papers aside and fishing around the bottom, his fingertips grazed over the cool metal of the key.

"Right here," he said triumphantly, letting the key spin around itself on the red string. Stefan merely snatched the key from him and turned to unlock the library doors.

But Matt swore he saw the faintest smile graze the librarian's face. They strode through the large double doors and into the main hallway.

"It's still so dusty in here," Matt noted, coughing a little at the change in the atmosphere.

"It can't be helped, Mr. Reed. I dust these shelves a few times a week, and the dust keeps building up. It's probably due to the age of this building," the librarian replied, stopping at the doorway connecting the hallway to the library. Matt stopped in his tracks as well, a little startled. Did Stefan see someone in there?

However, instead of recoiling, Stefan merely ran a clawed hand down the worn wooden column and sighed forlornly. "I can tell you...this place was spectacular when Old Town was around. People..." he bit his lip, Matt could tell from the side view, "people appreciated books more than the average person does today."

Matt couldn't help but sigh a little to himself. He knew that the librarian wasn't lying. Hardly any of his friends read for English assignments, whereas Matt would never skip a page. He felt a need to express this to Stefan; why he wasn't sure. "I've appreciated a good book ever since I was little. And I still do. Why do you think I'm here, after all?"

Stefan's hand stilled at Matt's reply. It had clearly caught the boy off-guard, and Matt was wondering if maybe he had said too much. Maybe he had offended Stefan by making an assumption that the librarian was criticizing his own choices?

But it was then that Stefan turned to Matt...

And smiled. This caught *Matt* off-guard as he felt his face slowly growing warm. Stefan only continued to beam at him.

"I'm glad there are still people like you in this world, Matthew Reed."

It was at this that Matt regained his control. He cleared his throat before speaking again. "Um, my name isn't short for 'Matthew.'"

"Oh! I'm sorry."

"No, it's okay; people do that all the time." Truth be told, Matt hated when people assumed his name was Matthew, but he wasn't about to snap at the person who had graciously allowed him access to such a place.

Stefan blinked, and his ears twitched. "Then what is it an abbreviation of?" he asked. Before Matt could respond, Stefan blushed a little. "No, no, forget I asked. It's none of my business," he added cheerily.

"All right..." Matt wouldn't have had a problem telling the librarian his full name, but it seemed to make the polite and proper boy uncomfortable, so Matt let it slide.

Besides, the twitching ears combined with that blush just looked so cute...

"What did you decide on?"

"*Julius Caesar*." Matt sat down at a table with the play in hand. After his "Cigarette Search" had turned up no loose cigarettes or used butts (not even his lighter), the librarian had let him explore as he so wish. Stefan had been going through his almost ritualistic cleaning duties when he finally saw Matt emerge from one of the many shelves.

"Shakespeare fan?" he asked, halting his chores to stride over. Matt nodded.

"He was so far ahead of his time in his ideals and writing style. I haven't read too many of his works, but I read *Hamlet* in middle school and I was immediately in love," he said, snickering a little at how...surprisingly feminine he sounded.

"Well, we have his entire collection of plays, save for one copy of *King Lear*. But I doubt whoever borrowed it is going to be returning it anytime soon," Stefan replied, resting his arms on the table to look at Matt.

The teen cleared his throat. "Listen, Stefan, I can't thank you enough for allowing me to come here like this."

"It's no trouble at all, Matt. I'd rather it be you than some delinquent with no respect for literature," Stefan said, seething a little.

He really is biased towards people today, Matt mused. He wondered absently if Stefan was always like this, but continued, "Well, what I'm trying to say is...I'd be happy to pay you back in some way."

Stefan paled a little. "Oh, no! I couldn't ask you for that, Matt! It wouldn't be right, we hardly know each other!"

He grinned. "That doesn't mean I can't be a good Samaritan, right?" he glanced over at the broken window, his previous entrance into the library, where the wind was blowing through. "I know. I'll help you board up that window!"

"B-Board it up? I was just going to put a cloth over it or something..."

"That won't do a very good job of keeping out the elements," Matt replied knowingly. "Listen, I should be getting home. But it's almost the weekend. This Saturday, I'll go to the hardware store, bring back some tools, and I'll board up the window for you. All right?"

Stefan wanted to protest, but he knew it would be futile. Matt was hell-bent on using this as an equivalent exchange for access to the library. "...Are you sure? It would just be a waste of your free time."

Matt paused at this. But then he smiled again. "Stefan...this library *is* my free time now." He held up the copy of *Julius Caesar*. "May I borrow it?"

"Well, it is a library."

"Cool, thanks," Matt called back quickly before grabbing the key and dashing outside.

Stefan watched him go, still stunned by his words.

"This library is my free time now."

The words rang through his head as he walked up the stairs into his bedroom. "I can't believe he's so dedicated to an old place like this..." Stefan mused aloud to himself.

His eyes fell onto the large folder on the desk in his room. "Maybe he can help me with more than repairs..."

Oh, the mystery! And so early on, too o_o

Sorry for the delay on this chapter, I have no excuse T_T *kowitz to the readers* I promise I'll make

time to write another chapter!

(1) I couldn't resist XD Matt, Caitlin and Alex are avid otaku; what can I tell ya? >_> oh, and if you don't know who L is... X_x

P.S. I apologize if I'm not writing the titles of the plays correctly X_x I can never remember when it's underlined or when it's italicized.

Julius Caesar © William Shakespeare