

Shifters

By Maciej Nowakowski

Deep within the “Forbidden Jungles” of Central Nigeria, in the makeshift huts built on top of the tallest trees, the abandoned children of the jungles were preparing for another installment of their most special ceremony. Dozens of kids, with ages ranging from 3 to 15, were all gathered in excitement, circling around one of their most popular members, Kira, as she stood there smiling from ear to ear, waiting for Scratch, the leader of the tribe. As Scratch finally approached, the children nervously made space for him whilst simultaneously bowing in his presence. Kira began to bow as well, as Scratch, with a face as stern as the day is long, began his declaration.

“Kira, you have proven yourself as one of the best shape-shifters in our tribe. You have mastered your abilities across a number of animals, from baboon, to eagle, to elephant. You’ve proven yourself as one of our best hunters and fighters. And as a result, you may now select yet another animal to take the form of. So, what’s your choice?”

“A panther!” she exclaimed, without hesitation.

“Very well then...extend your hand!”

Kira proudly stuck out her hand, clenching her teeth, as Scratch very quickly morphed into a panther. Letting out a roar, he slashed her hand with his razor-sharp claws. As the blood dripped down her hand, Kira let out a roar as she quickly morphed into a panther herself.

“By way of blood and sacrifice, you have earned another beast!” decreed Scratch, as the children cheered with all of their might, breaking into song and dance. Kira was ready to celebrate earning the one animal she had dreamed of getting, until she looked around the hut. All of the children were present, laughing, cheering, and dancing into the night. All but one, that is. Kira snuck out of the window of the hut, only to see that her best friend Del had been sitting on the roof the whole time, gazing at the night sky in a frustrated sulk.

“So, you’re still mad at me?” Kira asked him, despite already knowing the answer.

“I just don’t get it,” Del replied. “All you gotta do is just scratch me, that’s it.”

“I can’t just let you be a panther too. It breaks the code. Every shape-shifter must earn their beast. You know that.”

“Yes! I know!” Del jumped out of his sitting position. “But it’s been 10 years of just training, trying to hunt, trying to do all that nonsense, and what do I have to show for it? A snake. Just a freaking snake!”

“Del, just calm yourself. I’ve never seen you like this. Look, I know it must be tough--”

“What do you really know, Kira? You have like 30 animals now. You’re a star. Everybody in the tribe worships you, almost as much as Scratch!”

“But they like you too...I, mean, you’re so nice, and...”

“Are you daft!?” said Del, slumping back to his fetal pose. “They all laugh at me. I’m 13, and I still only have one snake. There are four year olds who have at least two animals. Scratch thinks I’m a joke, he never gives me a ceremony. I mean, why can’t you just give me one? Just one beast? A baboon, a vulture, just something.”

“Del, if Scratch finds out that I’ve been giving you handouts, we’re both dead,” she replied. “Besides, you wouldn’t know how to handle those creatures properly.”

“Hey--,” exclaimed Del, readying himself for a rebuttal, but he knew she was right. He then let out a heavy sigh, as Kira reached out her arms and hugged him.

“You’re right,” he said, slipping himself free from Kira’s embrace and turning away from her, not wanting her to see his watery eyes. “I need to earn it.”

“That’s right,” Kira said. “And you will.”

“Yeah,” Del replied. “Oh yeah. I’ll show you...,” Del began to whimper, his legs shaking, and his eyes letting down a stream of tears.

“I’ll show Scratch...,” he continued. “...I’ll show all of you.”

He suddenly jumped off the roof into the tree branches, and slid down the trunk towards the jungle floor, 30 feet below.

“Del! No!” Kira screamed.

One of the cardinal rules among the Tribe was never to go down to the jungle at night time, and here was Del doing just that. And as soon as he landed on the grass, he realized his

mistake. Looking him dead in the eyes, was that elusive animal he always wanted the ability to become, the panther.

Uh-oh, he looks like he'll give more than a scratch, thought Del, as the big cat let out a savage growl.

He bolted away, faster than he had ever run before.

It's only a matter of time before he catches me, he quickly thought. *I need to disappear.*

Del leaped into the green bushes, whilst simultaneously shrinking his body, morphing into a snake. The snake camouflaged perfectly with the lush greenness of the jungle, leaving the panther puzzled at the sudden disappearance of its prey.

"Okay... he must be gone now," Del said to himself, after nearly 20 minutes of hiding.

But as he slithered out of the bush, thinking he was free from danger, he saw an eagle zooming down towards him. Just as Del was about to go back to hiding in the bush, he realised he needed to change back into a human soon, due to the "shape-shift rumor". According to legend, if a shape-shifter stays as an animal for too long, they will remain in that form forever.

I've only been a snake for two seconds and I'm already sick of it, Del thought. *I'm not taking any chances.*

He quickly morphed back to a human, grabbed the first thing he could — a big stone — and flung it, hitting the eagle right between the eyes. Just as Del thrust his fist into the air in self-congratulation, he saw the bird hit the grass with a thud, and suddenly morph back into its human form. It was Kira. All this time, she had been trying to navigate the jungle as an eagle, looking for him, only to get struck unconscious. Del clapped a hand over his mouth in shock.

I...I've killed her, he thought to himself.

Out of nowhere, all of that noise had attracted the panther back to the spot, and the chase was on again. Del ran as fast as his body could allow, tears streaming down his face. Not noticing the low branch ahead of him, he ran head first into it, falling into an unconscious sleep.

As Del opened his eyes, a flash of white was followed by a blurry view of the inside of the biggest "hut" he had ever seen. He was lying in a bed, with fruit by his side, his head wrapped in fresh white bandages. Then, as he slowly turned his head to the left, he saw two men talking.

“I did what I could, poor child was just fighting for his life. I hope you can care for him well, Preacher,” said the man holding a shotgun.

“It is by the grace of God that he is still with us,” the white-collared man said, patting the other man on the shoulder. “You have made the Lord proud today, my brother.”

“Thank you, Preacher. God bless,” the man with the gun said as he left the room.

The preacher then turned to Del.

“Oh, my goodness! Look who has finally woken up! Not to worry, child, Preacher Okun is here to care for you!” he exclaimed.

Del was still barely conscious. He could only whisper things under his breath.

“Um....what? Where? What?” he winced, barely audible.

“Look at you! This is what happens when you wander off into the jungle alone, young man! But please, not to worry, the Lord has forgiven you,” said Preacher Okun. “After all, hahaha.....you are only HUMAN.”

Del’s eyes widened.

“HUMAN???” he asked, as he suddenly woke up with a jolt of energy.

“Ooooooh, my goodness!” the preacher laughed. “Looks like that panther got to you quite hard. Not to worry, my child. Please, take as much rest as you can, then we can hopefully get you back to your family.”

“Um, family....?” Del pondered.

“Oh, you do have a family, no?”

Del shook his head.

“Well, then,” said the preacher as he took Del’s hand. “By God’s will, I will care for you as long as I can. So says the Book of Matthew, ‘do unto others what you would have them do unto you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets...’”

He then hugged Del with all of his might, but Del, much to his own surprise, didn’t feel shocked or disturbed. Instead, he too wrapped his arms around the preacher. It was a feeling completely foreign to him, like as though he was really loved by someone, and he liked it.

“Ooooooh, my goodness. What a blessing this truly is,” said Preacher Okun.

And so, as the days went by, the preacher welcomed all of the villagers to say hello to his new surrogate son. All of these people came to Del in his new bedroom, giving him greetings and blessings. He had never felt this kind of love before, nor would he ever have expected it from humans.

Scratch would always tell the children of the Tribe about “The H-word”, the most brutal and vicious species ever known. He explained how the children were abandoned at young ages by their “H-word families”, who dumped them in the forbidden jungle because of “witchcraft”, leaving them with no choice but to fend for themselves in a dense rainforest, in which the safest place is at the top of the trees. Even saying the actual word was enough to make Scratch’s blood boil, and he would always say that once all of the Tribe’s children were strong enough, they would find the village and take revenge.

Everything Del had once believed to be as given as the rise and fall of the sun had now been blown to smithereens.

I’ve been treated better by H-words in one day than in the 10 years I was stuck in that hole, he thought to himself. And besides, I can’t go back to the Tribe, not after what I have done to Kira.

Being an H-word was beginning to sound more and more enticing to him, especially with the preacher by his side. He had even begun learning about the Bible, as Preacher Okun’s teachings were really making more and more sense to him, especially in comparison to the vagaries of Scratch’s teachings. Scratch would always say how shape-shifters were specifically chosen by the heavens to have this ability, but never went into further detail than that. Now, as the preacher recited John 15:16 to him, his life was beginning to take on meaning: “It is not you who has chosen me, but it is me who has chosen you.”

Del had begun to see shape-shifting as a gift from God, and wondered how he could take advantage of it. Then, after a week had passed, and Del’s health had recovered, he was anxious for Preacher Okun to finally show him the village.

“Okay, my boy,” Preacher Okun said, hesitantly. “But I do warn you, these are tough times in our village.”

“What’s wrong?” asked Del.

“Come, my boy, I shall show you.”

It was the first time Del had stepped out of the preacher’s home, and what he saw as he walked out made him wish he had stayed inside. Everything was dry, the trees were wilting, and many of the people were dehydrated and weak. All of Del’s recent ideas of the village being a paradise were fading one by one. The preacher then took Del to the local well near the village outskirts, where it appeared everyone was crowded around. Out of the dried-up well came a worker covered in grime and dirt.

“Find anything?” one of the villagers asked.

“Looks to be a clogged pipe,” said the worker, “but it’s too small to reach. We may have to salvage whatever water we have now.”

All of the villagers then looked at each other, seeing if anyone had any ideas, but only blank faces stared back. Then, Preacher Okun stepped into the middle.

“Not to worry, my children. In moments like these, we must band together in the name of God.”

The crowd then began to cheer.

“YES, PREACHER MAN!” some shouted.

“AMEN!” others screamed.

“Think not of what you DON’T have, but rather what you DO have!” the preacher continued. “We have each other, we have our gifts! Oh, SOOOO many gifts, indeed!”

Immediately, Del’s mind lit up. He ran and hopped onto the rim of the well, and threw himself into the bottom. The crowd let out a collective “NO!” as they could only watch as he was already out of sight, deep within the well’s dark underbelly.

“What do we do now, Preacher?” the villagers asked.

“Now...we pray.”

As the villagers anxiously joined hands and prayed, Del had already reached the bone-dry bottom of the well. Not being able to see anything, he felt around on the ground, looking for a water source. Nervous, but determined, he suddenly felt a small, metal hole, thinking to himself, *Hey! That’s it! That must be where the water comes from!*

He then shrank his body, morphing into a snake, making him slender enough to fit through the hole.

He slithered through the pipes for what felt like eons, to the point of him worrying more and more about the shape-shift rumor. That is, until he finally bumped into something.

“A...a stone?” he said to himself. “Yes! Yes! It’s a stone clogging the pipe!”

It felt wide, but not thick. Del believed that if he were to twist the stone it could release the water back through the pipes! He then pushed the stone from the bottom with his head, and as the stone began to twist, the water burst through the pipes, pushing Del through with it! Travelling through the pipes at blinding speed, he shot back towards the top of the well, with water following him.

Meanwhile, the villagers back on the surface were still praying.

“Look!” shouted one of the villagers, pointing, as out of nowhere, water began flowing back up to the top of the well! The villagers let out stunned gasps; they couldn’t believe the miracle that had occurred. But they were yet to cheer, as they were waiting for the emergence of their new champion. Then, amidst their silence, out of the water leaped Del, in human form, and soaking wet. The crowd let out a deafening cheer as they carried him out of the well. As the crowd held him up to congratulate him, Preacher Okun ran up to him.

“Ooooooh, my goodness!” he cried out in joy. “But how was this possible my boy?”

Del, almost completely out of breath, answered, “Because...it was God who had chosen me!”

The crowd then exploded into cheers. One week ago, Del had been an outcast among outcasts, and now, he had become a hero among heroes. At that moment, he knew that for the first time ever, he was home.

As the weeks continued, the newfound growth of the village’s spring harvest was equaled only by the newfound growth of Del’s popularity. After saving the water supply, he couldn’t walk down the gravel streets without being stopped by people offering fruit and gifts, or just wanting to thank him. He felt such pleasure in making H-words happy, especially Preacher Okun, who began training Del to be a pastor himself. Every Sunday, the village would draw to a standstill as everyone marched together to attend the morning mass at the local

parish, a building which never ceased to leave Del in awe, not only because of its sheer size in comparison to other buildings in the village, but also the profound impact it seemed to have on the townspeople. Everyone was wearing their best clothes, everyone was singing the happiest songs, and everyone was smiling at one another.

But why can't we always be like this? Del would ponder to himself.

After one Sunday mass, as he was leaving the building with Preacher Okun, Del curiously asked, "Preacher, if God is everywhere, why is it that in this place everyone seems to act the most holy?"

"Well, my boy," Preacher Okun replied, "because this is God's home. This is the one building where everyone is truly united by faith. Think about this, maybe you and your neighbor don't agree on which is the best restaurant, or the best market, and so on. But everyone can agree on the sanctity of the church."

The preacher then kneeled down to Del's height, and pointed upward towards the massive cross that stood high at the top of the church.

"As long as that cross remains up there, this community, regardless of anything, will remain together."

Del began to see the church as way to find fulfilment not only personally, but also socially. The faith seemed to be giving him things that he had never experienced before. Not only an identity, but the opportunity to be identified as a leader. Del, as such, began to dedicate more and more of his time to the faithful community. While in the day he trained as a preacher, at night he would use his powers in secret, constantly slithering through pipes to ensure the water was still flowing correctly.

Then, on one quiet night, as he came out of the well after another inspection, he heard a rustling in the bushes. Feeling compelled to investigate, he slowly approached the bushes. Out of nowhere, a meerkat leaped out of the bushes, scurrying towards Del at breakneck speed. The meerkat's body started getting bigger as it drew closer.

"Wait a moment..." Del realized what was happening.

Suddenly, the meerkat leaped in his direction, and in mid-air morphed back to its human form. As it landed, it was Kira.

The two stared at each other for a solid minute, both at a loss for words. Del launched himself at Kira, arms extended, and Kira stretched her arms out, as they celebrated with a massive hug.

“I thought we’d lost you!” Kira whispered in his ear, trying to hold back tears.

Del then felt rather nervous. He didn’t know how to respond, as he didn’t know if Kira had remembered or even noticed that it was he who had knocked her unconscious those many weeks ago, so instead, he just responded to her, saying, “I’ve been okay. Trust me.”

“I followed your tracks out of the Forbidden Jungles, once I realized it was a village of H-words, I almost knew you were a goner.”

“But, Kira,” Del said as he let go of her, “Scratch was wrong, these humans are fantastic!”

Kira gasped, barely restraining herself from slapping Del in the face.

“Don’t you say that word!” she screamed. “Scratch knows what he is talking about, these H-words are dangerous!”

“No!” Del yelled back, feeling almost offended. “I love them! They’ve given me a life here!”

Kira paused. “But, do they know who you really are?” she asked.

Del hesitated, turning around so that Kira couldn’t see his embarrassed face.

“Show them,” she continued, “and then see what kind of life they give you.”

Kira then stared at him, waiting for him to turn back around, so that they could finally go back home together. But Del wouldn’t budge. Then, after nearly a full minute of silence, he turned back, pointing his finger in the direction of the village.

“Listen...” he said, sternly. “These humans have treated me more like family than the Tribe ever could have. I’m a star here. A star. You know what they call me? They call me--”

“Del!” someone cried in the distance.

Del and Kira turned around, looking for whoever had screamed Del’s name. They both recognized the voice from somewhere. Almost immediately, another voice cheered, “Del! Kira!”

“At last! We’ve found you!” a third voice called out.

It felt as though the familiar voices were drawing in closer and closer. Suddenly, an outpour of snakes and one massive boa constrictor slithered their way towards Del and Kira. It was the children from the Tribe, who quickly morphed into their human forms, and, unable to contain their excitement, tightly circled their lost members in a parade of song and dance. Just as the circle was getting too tight, the boa cleared the way by maneuvering its massive scaly fuselage to the front. The children quickly silenced themselves and bowed down in its presence. It then stood up, and grew out its arms and legs, coming back to human form, all the while laughing hysterically. It was of course Scratch, who was in an unusually good mood.

"I cannot believe it," he let out an astonished laugh. "Tracks leading all the way to a village of...H-words. Kira, you've done it again."

He then turned to Del and looked down at him, trying to stare straight into his eyes, but Del impulsively looked down, thinking he was going to be punished.

"And Del..." Scratch continued, "...well, you've made yourself useful for a change."

"Actually, sir" Kira hesitantly interrupted, "Del found the village himself."

"Really?" Scratch said with an open-mouthed smirk. "Well, I'm impressed."

"You.....you *are*, sir?" Del suddenly looked up.

"Oh...oh, yes." Scratch pondered for a moment, turning to look towards the nearby village. "Honestly, Del, I always thought of you as the weakest member.....but seeing as how you are the one who led us here, well, it makes me think all of you are powerful. All of you are capable. All of you are...ready."

"Ready?" Del could barely speak in shock. "R-R-Ready for wha--"

"--Listen, all of you!" Scratch commanded. "This is the moment I have been waiting for...from the very day I was dumped off in that putrid SWAMP! It's time to prove to the heavens that we were righteous choices! It's time to finally go, and take revenge on the H-words!"

The children applauded in excitement, all surrounding Del, who just stared into the abyss as his mind went absolutely blank.

"But first!" Scratch interrupted, "There's one thing I need to do...Del! Step forward."

Del, using the little bit of consciousness he had left, slowly walked towards Scratch, not knowing what would follow. Scratch, with a proud smile, then decreed, “You’ve earned this...reach out your hand!”

As Del shakily extended his arm, Scratch let out a massive roar as he morphed into a panther, and swiftly slashed his claws across Del’s forearm. As Del fell to his knees from the pain, he slowly opened his eyes. Suddenly, he saw black fur, sharp claws, and a tail, all on his own body. He couldn’t believe it. He was finally a panther.

“Now you are an animal that is fit to battle an H-word!” Scratch boasted, whilst all of the children gathered around Del, cheering and petting him over finally getting a second animal.

“Okay, Tribe!” Scratch called out with all of his might, still in his panther form. “This is the moment! Everyone morph into the biggest predator you can! Because tonight, no H-word will be left un-mauled!”

The decree energized all of the children, leaving them to jump and cheer in anticipation, sensing an immediate victory. As they morphed into the biggest cats they could, from panthers, to lions, to leopards, Scratch set himself into a predatory crouch, with the village right in front of him.

“Ready?” he called out.

All of the children slowly copied his crouch, preparing themselves to follow his lead.

“Charge!” Scratch’s deafening cry drove the children to take off with him, as they sprinted towards the village without hesitation. Del however, stayed, as he was still in a state of shock.

Oh, no! Oh, no! What have I done? These were the only thoughts he could process at that moment. I can’t let them kill the humans! I...I need to warn them!

Luckily, Del knew a shortcut to the village, so he morphed into a snake, and leaped down into the well, swiftly slithering through the pipes leading to Preacher Okun’s kitchen. Dropping out of the faucet, he quickly morphed back into human form, and ran up the stairs, his quick feet banging on every step.

“Ooooooh, m-my goodness,” the preacher muttered, just waking up from Del’s noise.
“Del, my boy, what are you doing still awake? You know what time it is?”

“But Preacher,” Del panted in exhaustion, “there’s a group of...of...shape-shifters, they-”
“What?!?” The preacher didn’t even let Del finish. As soon as he heard “shape-shifters”, he zoomed downstairs, pulled a shotgun and a megaphone from out of the front closet, and bolted out of the door.

“Everyone!” he called out on the megaphone, waking up the whole village. “Everyone! This is an emergency, the witches are coming! I repeat, the witches are coming!”

All of the men from the village stormed out of their doors, grabbing guns, knives, torches, any kind of weapon they could find.

“Del, my boy,” the preacher said softly, holding Del’s shoulder, “you stay inside, where it’s safe. I can’t let those shape-shifters hurt you.”

“B-but Preacher, I--”

“No, Del,” Preacher Okun said as he grabbed his arm. “You have already done well by telling me. I say, God truly has chosen you indeed!”

Preacher Okun then squeezed Del with a hasty hug, and rushed to lead the mob whilst cocking his gun.

“Okay, where are they? Where are the witches?!?” screamed one of the villagers.

“Wherever they are, we’ll be ready for them!” Preacher Okun called at the top of his lungs. “Remember, they are cursed products of the devil! Spare none of them!”

“Spare none!” the villagers replied, determined to fulfil the preacher’s requests.

Del had never seen such rage, or such anger among the villagers. He began to fear that what Scratch had always talked about was indeed true. He then ran with all his speed, trying to catch up to the mob, who was marching towards the outskirts.

Suddenly, as they turned the corner, to the edge of the village, there they saw the Tribe, sprinting towards them in their many cat forms.

“I see them, I see them!” screamed a villager, nervously pointing them out.

“Yes! Yes! It’s time!” laughed Scratch from the other side. The sight of humans just boosted his speed even more. With his urge for the first kill, he breezed past all the other Tribe members, and then leaped towards the humans with his claws extended.

But then, the deafening blast of a shotgun erupted across the village, and Scratch’s body collapsed back onto the gravel. His body lay there, motionless, with a bullet wound torn through his chest. Out of the crowd emerged Preacher Okun, holding his smoking gun.

“S-Scratch...” said Kira, stunned and confused. “No...no...no!”

Suddenly, all of the Tribe children didn’t know what to do. They reverted back into their human forms, and began to cry, holding each other in desperation.

“Wait! Stop! Hold on!” yelled Del as he charged his way past the villagers, finding his way to the front. When he saw his Tribe leader laying completely lifeless, with the Tribe children weeping behind, he collapsed to his knees. But the preacher was quick to pick Del up from the ground, and look him straight in the eyes, saying, “Hey! My boy! Don’t let them fool you! They are possessed! They are witches! They are acts of the devil! They are trying to show you right now that they’re weak, and fragile, but they’re not!”

Del looked back at him with an icy, stern gaze. He quickly glanced back at Kira, holding three of the youngest children, tears streaming down all of their faces. Then, as he turned back to Preacher Okun, he coldly asked,

“You want to tell me that they are not weak? That they are not fragile?”

Preacher Okun replied with a simple nod of his head, as Del let out a nervous chuckle, “Well, you’re right...we’re not!”

Out of nowhere, Del threw himself on the ground, shrinking into a snake. Letting out a shocked screech, Preacher Okun exclaimed, “He’s possessed! My boy, Del, has been possessed!”

“NO!” a villager cried. “The devil is working his savagery with no mercy!”

“We’re too late, we have no choice! We must kill him! Kill him NOW!” yet another villager demanded.

Preacher Okun and the villagers fired countless rounds in Del's direction, but the snake was too small and slender a target for them, as he slithered across the gravel at breakneck speed.

"Come on! Follow me!" Del screamed as he passed the Tribe children.

"Let's go! Snake! Snake! Snake!" Kira screamed desperately, as she made sure the younger children were paying attention.

The children all shrank into garden snakes and bolted in Del's direction. But the villagers were hot on their trail, with weapons in hand. Kira suddenly increased her speed to match Del's position in front.

"Del, we can't run away forever!" she cried nervously. "What can we do?"

"Just follow my lead!" Del immediately replied!

As the villagers began to fire their weapons towards them, the band of snakes swiftly slithered through the trail, evading every bullet with ease.

"There it is!" Del exclaimed. "The church! Everyone, get inside!"

We must be safe here, they wouldn't dare attack the church, he thought to himself.

As the children all entered through the different gutters of the local parish, Del stayed behind, making sure that all of the children had made it in safely before slithering in himself.

As soon as the mob of villagers caught up to the parish, an enraged Preacher Okun burst out of the crowd with his gun cocked and aimed directly at Del.

"Go back to hell, where you belong!" he screamed as he let out a massive shot.

Del, however, just evaded the shot as he zipped into the gutter. The miss, however, led Preacher Okun over the edge, sending him into a frenzy. He began to shoot the gutters, the walls, the windows of the parish — nothing was spared from his attack. Each shot added more damage to a now derelict church. Meanwhile, the children, remaining as snakes, began to grow more and nervous.

"Del, we can't stay as snakes forever!" Kira exclaimed. "What about the rumor?"

Del, trying to raise his voice amid the gunshots, swiftly replied, "It's either stay alive as a snake, or die as a human!"

Kira stared and nodded at Del. The children all began to accept the fact that they may remain as snakes forever. To Del, it even appeared as a blessing.

If even the church can't stop you, Preacher, he thought, then I don't know if I want to be human.

The church began to slowly fall to pieces. As the roof began cracking, and the walls slowly began caving in, the preacher fell to his knees, screaming, panting, and eventually bursting into tears as he suddenly realized the mess he had created. The villagers had gathered and all stood staring at their now derelict church in a state of shock and fear.

As the barrage of gunshots faded, Del quickly led the children to slither up to the church's main tower, where the massive cross stood.

"Is everyone okay?" Del asked nervously. "We're all here, yes? Oh, thank goodness."

Del, with a horrified look, then saw the damage that had been done to the church from the outside. The tower was covered in a mass of bullet holes, and the cross itself was cracked and leaning at a perilous angle.

"The cross! It's falling!" one of the villagers gasped.

"Oh, goodness, somebody do something!" another yelled.

Preacher Okun, dazed and in tears, slowly began whispering to himself, "No...no...I've failed you, my God. I've failed you."

Oh, no! The cross! Del thought. Wait...the cross! That's it!

"Come on!" he commanded.

Kira, confused, asked, "Del, what do you mea—"

"Just follow my lead, grab someone and don't let go!"

In a split second, as the cross was beginning to tip over, and the villagers watched in shock, Del leapt with all of his might onto the cross, wrapping his body around the midpoint of the wood. Then, as one of the snakes grabbed onto him, another followed, with another and another following suit. Suddenly, the large string of snakes formed its final link with Kira, who began wrapping herself around the bottom end of the tower. The villagers all looked in astonishment at the chain of snakes.

"They're saving the cross!" one villager exclaimed.

“Incredible!” a village woman cried out.

“Bless them!” others sang out.

Preacher Okun could only watch in disbelief.

My boy..., he thought.

Del, wrapping the cross with all of his might, then let out with his last bit of breath,
“Okay! Pull.”

Then, as a chorus of grunts and screams ensued, the children began their slow attempt at bringing the cross back upward, but they were struggling. Kira, beginning to shake with exertion as her torso remained wrapped around the end of the tower, slowly exclaimed, “I...I think we caught it a little too late! It’s too far down!”

“We can still do it!” Del exclaimed, “We need to save this cross! On the count of three, we all pull!”

“B-but Del...” one of the children said, “I don’t know if we can...”

“Just trust me!” Del didn’t even let him finish. “On the count of three, with all your might! Let’s go! One! Two...Three!”

And as the children began to pull, they felt lighter than air, as if they were raising the cross back to its proud state with no effort at all. Suddenly, as they looked upward, they saw the villagers, who one by one, had climbed up the tower to help them pull the cross back. Then, as they all held the cross as one, they began repeating “Ready? Pull!” simultaneously, as they swiftly pulled their cross back to an upright angle on the very top of the tower. The children then collapsed onto the roof of the church, very slowly shifting back into their human forms. But before they could all celebrate, they saw one solitary snake, laying on the roof. As a large group gathered around the unconscious snake, Kira leaped to the very front.

“Del?” she whispered, on the verge of tears.

All of the villagers looked on in stunned silence.

“Kira?” one of the children softly asked, “is Del going to be a snake forever now?”

Kira stared at Del lying motionless, “I think that is the best we can hope for right now.”

Preacher Okun then found his way to the front of the group.

“Del...my boy.” He fell to his knees. “You saved the cross. You saved us. You saved all of us.”

He then paused, as he shut his crying eyes. “Why?”

“Because...” a familiar voice exclaimed, as the preacher’s eyes suddenly widened.

Del’s body slowly morphed back into its human form. Barely conscious, and panting heavily, he finished his statement. “Because...it was God who has chosen me.”

A chorus of applause came from both the humans and shape-shifters alike. Del couldn’t believe it. In such a short span of time, he had once again gone from an outcast to a hero. But this time it was among both of his communities.

As he was being embraced by the villagers, Del turned towards the children, and letting out an exhausted sigh of relief, he smiled, “Guys...welcome home.”