

RISING ASH

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PART 2

LILIA sat on the couch inside her home and listened to Master Victor explain what he and the twins were.

“We are members of a very ancient and secretive organization. The Order of Chowa,” he began, “We are trained to hunt demons and goblins as well as many other types of supernatural manifestations.”

“Demons. Like the one in my son?” Lilia asked.

“Yes, madam.” Victor answered, “Your son has unwittingly become the host to the demon known as Kordak. He is a demon who leaves chaos wherever he travels. He can only survive by taking on a host. The host has usually already committed many crimes, murder in particular. Only with this trait could Kordak hope to fully control the host.”

“But, Ash has never killed anyone in his life.” Lilia protested.

“That is what bothers me, ma’am. Your son does not fit the pattern of hosts. Not only has he not killed anyfur or anything, he has not committed any sort of crime at all. He is a model citizen.”

Lilia shifted on the couch. Calleigh sat down beside her and tried to comfort her. Calleigh looked to her brother then to Victor.

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“Is there anything we can do, master?” Calleigh asked.

“I do not know. The battle for control over his body is between Ash and Kordak. I do not believe there is anything we can do in that respect. However, we can find him and protect him while he tries.”

“Protect him from what?” Cole asked cautiously.

“From other demons. Demons that might seek to harness Kordak’s powers. And, to protect him from the Council of the Chowa, for they seek only to destroy Kordak and believe that the only way to do so is to destroy the host body as well.”

“They want to kill my son. They know nothing about him!” Lilia said in a raised voice.

“I agree. That is why I wish to help. Your son’s willingness to die threw me earlier. I did not know what it meant, but now I believe it shows Kordak does not have as much control over him as we think.”

“What if he transforms again? What do we do?” Cole asked.

“Let us hope it does not come to that.” Victor started then paused, “Tell me, Lilia, how many times has the demon taken complete control of your son?”

“Twice.”

“Only twice?”

“Yes. Why?” Lilia asked, concerned.

“This could mean that Kordak does not have as much control over Ash as he would like to think. This could work to our advantage.”

“Do you have a plan?” Lilia asked.

“Calleigh. You will remain here with Mrs. Reynolds. Cole and I will go in search of the boy. Cole. Have you your ring?”

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“Yes.” Cole said pulling the ring from the chord around his neck.

“Calleigh, you had better have yours ready as well.”

“Yes, master.” Calleigh replied.

Calleigh pulled out her necklace and removed the ring that hung from it. Cole and Calleigh placed their rings on their fingers. White energy began to emanate from Cole’s ring, engulfing his paw then spreading over his entire body. Calleigh’s ring reacted in a similar fashion, only hers produced deep purple energy. The wolf twins’ bodies glowed. The colored energy washed over their clothes and transformed them. Cole’s clothes became like the ones Master Victor wore. Black pants and a black sleeveless shirt. Cole also gloves with the fingers cut off. Two short swords appeared strapped to his back in crossed scabbards.

Calleigh’s clothing took on a similar appearance. Her pants, however, were not made from leather and had a lower cut and were loose fitting. Her shirt also was dissimilar in that it did not reach all the way to her waist. Her gloves were whole, unlike Cole’s. A pair of sai appeared in a special rigging on the back of her waist. A sword whose length was about half way between Cole’s and Victor’s appeared across her back. Calleigh removed the sheathed sword from her back and placed it on the table in front of the couch. Lilia picked up the sword and pulled it from the scabbard. The blade shimmered with blue energy. There was an inscription carved into the blade of the sword:

Strength and wisdom is given unto the wielder of this blade.

Lilia replaced the sword in its sheath. Cole and Victor rose and moved to the door. Cole said goodbye to Calleigh and Lilia. Victor bowed deeply before the distraught fox lady. Nodding slightly to Calleigh, Victor joined Cole outside the house to begin their search. They tracked Ash to the street corner where he had done battle with seven furs and destroyed one car.

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The two furs found a police officer kneeling before a crying cowgirl. The officer was trying to comfort the young girlfur when Victor and Cole neared. The officer told the two furs how he had seen a boyfox fly from the scene. Cole and Victor looked skyward in the direction the officer had pointed. Cole and Victor exchanged glances of hopelessness.

* * *

ASH floated high over the town he now called home. He looked down at the artificially lighted street. It was midnight and the air was cold. Ash drew his coat close around him. He decided that he needed to go away for a while to think. He would need to get a few changes of clothes from his room before leaving. Ash looked down and saw his house. He could see that the lights were on in the house; his mother was still awake. Ash turned and flew down towards his house. He drew closer to it and landed softly on the roof; his boots did not make a sound. Ash looked around to see if anyfur might have seen him land on the roof. Quietly, Ash walked down the slanted roof and looked over the edge into the backyard. Ash lifted from the roof and floated down level with his bedroom window.

It was opened.

It's a trap, boy.

Ash frowned at the comment made by the voice in his head. Ears laid back against his head, Ash silently crawled through the window. Once inside, Ash crossed to his closet and pulled out a dark green hooded, long-sleeve shirt, a black coat, a pair of black slacks and a pair of hiking boots, also black. He changed into the new set of clothes then retrieved his duffle bag from the closet. Ash proceeded to fill the bag with enough clothes for two weeks. He zipped up

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the duffle. Looking around, Ash saw his father's Cerberus pendant hanging from its stand on the dresser. He walked over to the dresser and lifted the pendant from its hook.

As he placed the pendant around his neck, Ash heard a noise behind him. Ash turned and stared in surprise at the fur that stood in the doorway. Calleigh stared back at Ash with equal surprise in her eyes, but there was something else as well. There was also fear in her wolf eyes. Fear for what, Ash was afraid to know. Ash broke eye contact and moved to his bed to pick up the duffle. Lifting the bag from the bed, he walked to the window. Calleigh ran to him and grabbed him by the arm. Ash looked down at her paw then back to her eyes.

"Where are you going to go?" Calleigh asked softly.

"I don't know," Ash said, "Please, don't tell anyfur I was here."

"What about your mother?"

"Her most of all. Goodbye."

Ash turned from Calleigh and leapt from the windowsill. Calleigh watched as Ash flew off into the night sky. A single tear rolled down her face as she watched him go. Ash glanced back at the house and saw Calleigh still standing in the window. Ash shook from a feeling of yearning from himself and looked away from the house. Ash began to fly higher and higher, faster and faster. An eerie orange trail of energy began to follow him as he gained speed. Ash veered to the left a little and changed his direction. Ash left the houses behind after a while. A long stretch of road winded underneath him. He watched as cars moved to and fro along the highway.

As the sun began to rise over the distant mountains, Ash neared a small town hundreds of miles east of Furrstown. Ash turned downward and head towards the street below. Touching down gently, Ash walked down the road towards one of the far houses. The house stood empty

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and dark. Ash looked up and down the dimly lit street. Pushing the gate aside, he walked up to the porch. Ash pulled a bundle of keys from his pants pocket and flipped through them. Settling on one key, Ash unlocked the door and entered the house. He closed the door behind him and walked up the staircase just inside the door. Ash entered one of the bedrooms and fell upon the bed.

* * *

VICTOR and Cole returned late the next morning.

“Did you find him?” Lilia asked insistently.

“Sadly, no, we did not, madam.” Victor answered solemnly.

Cole walked into the living room and sat down in one of the chairs. Calleigh knelt beside him and scratched the fur on his arm. Cole looked down at his sister. Reaching over, he put his right index finger to her nose then placed it between her eyes. Calleigh crossed her eyes and her brother laughed a bit. Cole put his finger to her forehead and pushed her backwards. Calleigh fell on her tail and started laughing. Lilia and Victor walked into the living room. They exchanged worried glances at the playing twins then sat down. Lilia sat down a tray she had been carrying. On the tray was a pot of coffee and four mugs. Calleigh served everyfur a cup of coffee then sat back down on the ground.

Cole held his mug to his nose and sniffed it deeply. It smelled somehow strange to him. He sniffed again. The smell was alien and yet it seemed familiar. Cole thought hard to try and place the smell. He closed his eyes and sipped at his coffee. Then it hit him. It smelled like.... Cole set his mug on the table and stood up.

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“Calleigh, can I see you outside for a sec?” Cole asked.

“Sure.” Calleigh answered a little perplexed.

Calleigh rose from the floor and followed Cole out through the sliding door into the backyard. Cole walked out into the yard and was silent for a while. Calleigh took a seat at the table that was in the middle of the fenced area. Cole began to pace, turning every so often to look at his sister. He opened his mouth to talk several time but said nothing. Calleigh began to get worried.

“Cole, would you say something already?” she pleaded.

“He was here, wasn’t he?” Cole asked sternly.

“Who?”

“Don’t play dumb with me. You know good and well who I’m talking about.”

“You mean Ash.”

“Somefur give the wolfgirl a prize. Yes, I mean Ash.”

“Why would you ask me that?”

“Just now when you handed me my coffee. I smelled him. And, now that I think about it, I have the same smell on my arm.”

“Why would you have...?”

“Where you touched me when I sat down. When was he here?”

Calleigh looked away from her brother and was silently for a few minutes. Calleigh began to cry. Cole hadn’t meant to seem harsh. He moved and sat next to his sister and hugged her close. Calleigh sobbed into his shirt then began to mutter a bit.

“I’m sorry, Calleigh. I didn't mean to make you cry.” Cole said apologetically.

“He was here at around midnight.” Calleigh muttered.

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“What?” Cole said holding his sister where he could see her eyes.

“Ash. He came in the middle of the night. He filled a duffle bag with clothes and left.”

“Why didn't you say anything to Lilia?”

“He made me promise not to tell anyone. He wants to be alone for a while.”

“Oh. I'm sorry I made you break your promise. I won't say anything.”

“I love you.”

“Yeah, right.”

Calleigh sat up and looked at Cole. He gave her a big goofy grin. She slapped him on the arm and continued to swat at him. Cole waved his arms about defensively. Deciding that it was a losing battle, Cole got up from the bench and ran to the door. Calleigh bounded after her fleeing twin. Cole stopped at the door and slid it open for her and let her pass. Cole looked up into the sky and smiled.

“Good luck, Ash. Don't stay away too long.”

* * *

ASH tossed and turned in this bed that had been his own for the first seventeen years of his pain ridden existence. Sweat ran through his fur as he tried to fight off a terrible nightmare. Ash had hoped coming here would lessen the nightmares. They had gotten worse. Much worse. Ash was now seeing things he had no memories of. He saw himself playing in the front yard with a foxboy a few years younger than himself. The smaller foxboy ran back and forth across the lawn and Ash tried to catch him. Ash would catch up to the smaller fox and tap him on the top of his head. The foxboy would turn around and start chasing Ash. Then it happened.

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A black mist drifted down out of the clear blue sky. A pair of luminous red eyes glared out from the cloud. The mist advanced on the playing foxboys. The red eyes narrowed when they settled on Ash. The mist gained speed and overtook the scurrying kits. Ash turned and was consumed by the mist. The second boy ran a little further then stopped when he realized he was not being chased. When the boy saw what was happening to Ash he cried out. Ash's mother and father emerged onto the porch. The mist disappeared into Ash and he slumped to the ground, his father shaking him and his mother holding the other foxboy tightly.

The dream changed rapidly to that night his father died. The other foxboy was there as well. Ash was dressed as a pirate and the other kit was disguised as a character from his favorite video game. Ash's father was leading the two kits down the walkway when it happened. Ash's right paw began to burn. He doubled over in pain, slumping to his knees on the ground. His father ran to his side. Strangely, the other kit walked up on Ash's other side. Ash's paw shot out and he transformed into Kordak. Kordak lifted Ash's father from the ground. With a flick of his wrist, Kordak snapped his father's neck. A miniscule blast of yellow energy hit Kordak in the chest. Looking down, he saw the other kit looking up at him with tears in his golden-yellow eyes.

You killed my Daddy! the kit yelled.

Kordak snarled at the kit then threw a ball of red fire at the foxboy. When the flames from the blast dissipated, the second kit was gone. Ash's mother came out of the house and screamed out a name...

"Micah." Ash said sitting up.

Ash sat on the edge of his bed and contemplated what he had seen. That kit had never been in his dreams before. Why now? And the kit had called his father 'Daddy'. Ash didn't

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have a brother. Ash held his head in his paws. Whoever the kit was, it was obvious that Kordak had killed him. Ash got up from the bed and went into the bathroom down the hall. Ash closed the door behind him out of habit. Ash looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. He closed his eyes and lowered his head. Opening his eyes, he looked back. In the mirror stood not himself but Kordak, the winged, eight-tailed demon fox. Ash laid his ears back and bared his fangs at the mirror.

“Who’s the kit, Kordak?” Ash growled.

I haven’t the foggiest idea, my dear Ash.

“I’m not going to play games with you. Who is he?”

Do you not remember him?

“No.”

Then neither do I. I can only look into the memories you have, not ones that have been buried. You still have too much control over your own mind.

Ash glared at the demon fox after that last remark. Clenching his right paw into a fist, Ash drove it through the mirror. The shards of the mirror fell into the sink and onto the linoleum floor. Blood dripped from Ash’s knuckles. He washed his paw and wrapped bandages around it. Leaving, Ash went to get a broom and a dustpan. Ash swept up the shards of glass on the floor and carefully lifted the pieces out of the sink. When he was done, Ash walked back to his bedroom and sat down on the bed. The identity of the kit was going to haunt him now that he knew he had killed him. No, not he, it was Kordak. *He just had control of your body*, Ash told himself.

Ash sat there, tormented by his own thoughts. His mother would know the boy. Ash couldn’t go home just yet, Kordak was still part of him. And, he still was not entirely sure he

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could trust Calleigh, Cole and their so-called master. There did seem to be something oddly familiar about that leopard called Victor. Ash wondered why Calleigh had not told him about who they really were. *Like you told her anything*, Ash scolded himself. He got up from the bed and walked to the window. Ash wanted to howl, but if he did he would be found. He crumpled to the floor under the window with his back to the wall and cried.

* * *

TWO months passed. Calleigh had managed to convince Cole and Victor not to search for Ash for a while after the third straight week of no luck. Cole agreed right off. Victor, however, only grudgingly accepted Calleigh's course of action. Lilia sat on the couch silently with a cup of tea clutched in her paws. Cole moved and sat down beside her. Victor and Calleigh sat crossed legged on the floor looking at Lilia. All was silent. Victor closed his eye and began to meditate. Calleigh decided that she had had enough and needed to see Ash. Calleigh cleared her throat. The others looked at her.

"Mrs. Reynolds, is there any place Ash might go that we haven't already looked?" Calleigh asked.

"I'm not sure." Lilia said then stopped to think.

Cole gave Calleigh a look that said *what-are-you-doing*. Calleigh paid him no attention.

"I guess it's possible he might have gone back to our old house." Lilia said at last.

"Where's the house?" Victor asked interested.

"Over in Clawson. Why?"

"I'm going to go get him." Victor stated rising.

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“No, your not. I’m going.” Calleigh said.

Victor eyed her carefully as she stood up from the floor. Calleigh looked him in the eye. He saw her determination and backed down. Calleigh walked around and knelt in front of Lilia.

“Mrs. Reynolds. I want you to know that I will not hurt your son. I love him too damn much to do anything to him. I’ll return soon. With Ash.”

Calleigh did not wait for a reply. She nodded to her twin then left the house. Calleigh jumped up and landed on top of a lamppost. Kicking off from there, Calleigh began her long journey to Clawson. Since she could not simply fly, Calleigh would have to continue jumping from tall object to tall object.



TOUCHING down in the front lawn, Calleigh ended her long journey to Ash’s old house in Clawson. She waited on the lawn, the cold December breeze blowing through her hair and fur. The snow on the ground crunched under her boots as she walked up to the door. She knocked twice. Nothing. She decided just to wait. She stood right where anyfur looking through the peephole could see her. After a couple minutes, the door began to open slowly. Calleigh stepped closer. A fox paw shot out the door and grabbed Calleigh by the collar of her coat. Calleigh was dragged into the house and the door slammed shut behind her.

Ash stood in front of her, eyes wide in confusion. Calleigh threw her arms around his neck and gave him a deep, loving kiss. She though he might struggle, but he did not. Finally, the two furs stepped away from each other. Calleigh looked down and the floor. Ash looked to his right towards the door. He walked over and locked it. When he came back to Calleigh, Ash

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grabbed her by the arm and led her into the darkened living room. Ash started a fire in the fireplace. Calleigh sat down in front of the fire. Throwing a blanket across her shoulders, Ash sat down beside her.

“What are you doing here? How did you find me?” Ash asked.

“I came because I love you.” Calleigh said.

“Does anyone else know where I am?”

“Yes. But, they’re not coming. I made them stay behind.”

Ash looked into the fire. Calleigh looked around at the old house. An old newspaper laid spread out on the floor behind them. She glanced at it. She saw the headline:

FREAK OCCURRENCE LEAVES ONE DEAD AND ONE MISSING

The newspaper was dated to October 31 five years earlier. The article told about how a male fox approximately thirty-eight years old had died from having his neck snapped. The article detailed how the police believed that whoever had murdered the older fox had kidnapped a small foxboy approximately nine-years old. The foxes’ names were Jesse and Micah Reynolds. The last name seemed to stick out a bit. Calleigh scanned the article. The article went on to talk about the family that was left behind to grieve. The wife and an older son. Calleigh’s eyes widened as she saw the names of the two bereaved furs.

“Lilia and Ash Reynolds.” Calleigh said aloud.

“What?” Ash said looking around.

Ash saw that Calleigh was reading the newspaper. She looked up from the article and right into Ash’s eyes. Ash looked at her then turned back to the fire. He lowered his head for a minute or two. Calleigh reached over and placed a paw on his shoulder. Ash looked up and cleared his throat.

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“Once when I was ten, I was playing outside with a little brother I have no memories of. That was the day Kordak first entered my body. The next three years were surprisingly uneventful. The scar appeared in that time, as well as the mark on my paw. On Halloween on the third year, my father was taking me and...”

Ash paused.

“Ash? What is it?” Calleigh asked.

“Nothing. Where was I? Oh, me and my brother were going trick-or-treating with our father. That was the first time Kordak took over. That was the night my father died.”

“But, what about the other boy? Micah?”

“I don’t really remember. In my dreams, he gets angry and throws an energy blast at Kordak. Then Kordak blasts him. There was nothing left but a charred place in the lawn.”

Ash fell silent after this. Calleigh slid close to him and put her arms around his shoulders. Ash started to cry a little bit. Calleigh tried to sound cheery as she spoke.

“Hey, what’s the matter?” she said.

“He was my brother and I killed him! And, then I forgot he ever existed! I don't deserve to live! He did! Micah deserved to live, but he couldn’t because I killed him!”

“Ash. Calm down. It wasn’t your fault. Kordak took control of you. It was as much your fault as Jake’s death.”

Ash seemed to cry harder when she said this. Calleigh hated herself deep down for saying it. Then something began to happen. Familiar orange flames began to form around Ash. Kordak was trying to get out. Calleigh did the only thing she could think of. Throwing off the blanket, she grabbed Ash by the shoulders and turned him towards her. Ash’s eyes had already begun to change and were giving off a faint, red glow. The flames burned her hands, but

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Calleigh held on. She leaned in and kissed Ash. For a while, it seemed as if Ash were too far gone to respond, but respond he did. He put his arms around her and drew her close. For a moment, the flames ceased to inflict pain upon Ash and just pulsated.



ASH lay in his bed, staring at the ceiling. A strange, but welcomed calm had fallen over him. No dreams of death and pain had visited him in the night. Thoughts of Micah still haunted him, but they only did so because it bothered Ash that he would have forgotten somefur as close to him as his own brother. Ash rose from the bed, careful not to wake Calleigh. Calleigh shifted under the covers. Ash pulled a pair of sweatpants over his naked body and walked to the bathroom. Ash walked in and turned on the light. He turned to close the door, but decided not to. He glanced into the replacement mirror he had had to buy. His eyes almost fell out of his head at what he saw.

“It’s gone.” Ash whispered.

He ran one finger down the center of his torso. The scar was gone. Ash wondered at first if it was some trick being played on him by Kordak. Ash went back to his room and got dressed then went down stairs and started making a pot of coffee. Calleigh came downstairs after a while and found Ash sitting at the table. A mug of coffee sat in front of him and an empty mug sat across from him. Calleigh sat down and Ash reached across and poured her some coffee. She sipped at the steaming cup of coffee then looked up at Ash.

“You’re up early.” Calleigh said.

“No, I’m not.” Ash replied.

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“What do you mean?”

“I haven’t slept this late in almost nine years. Not since Kordak entered me.”

“Oh. I didn’t know. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I never said anything.”

“So, why did you sleep late this morning?” Calleigh asked playfully.

“Not a damn clue.” Ash answered grinning.

Ash fell silent for a couple minutes. Calleigh drank some more of her coffee and waited.

Ash lifted his mug then sat it down again.

“I think I’m ready to go home.” Ash said.

“You sure?”

“Yeah. I’m ready.”

* * *

COLE paced back and forth across the living room carpet. Lilia was in the kitchen busying herself with household chores. Victor hovered a couple feet off the ground, deep in meditation. Cole stopped in front of the window and looked out. Coming down the sidewalk towards the house, he saw Calleigh trotting along. A ways behind her, somefur was following her. The fur wore black slacks and a black coat. He had a hood pulled down low over his face. Cole could only see the very end of his nose and he did not seem to have a tail.

Cole moved to the door, drawing his swords as he went. Victor opened his eye and watched Cole walking away. Lowering his feet to the ground, Victor rose and drew his katana from its sheath. Lilia walked in, but stopped when she saw the drawn blades. Cole was standing

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right in front of the door ready to swing it open at a moments notice. Victor stood by, tightening his grip on the hilt of his sword. Somefur outside tried the knob and found the door was locked. There was knock on the door next. Cole put one sword away and grabbed the knob with his paw. In a flash, Cole flung the door opened and redrew his other sword.

Calleigh and Ash stood in the doorway and gave the three sharpened blades a confused look. Cole's eyes widened and a grin appeared on his muzzle when he saw Ash and his sister. Victor replaced his sword in its sheath and beckoned Lilia forward. Lilia came around the corner and saw Ash. She ran out the door and threw her arms around him. She turned and hugged Calleigh for being able to bring him back to her.

"Can we come in? It's kinda cold out here." Ash said through chattering teeth.

Lilia stepped back and let Calleigh and Ash walk inside. As Ash passed, he eyed Cole for a minute.

"Aren't you a little late for Halloween?" Ash asked.

"Shut up." Cole said.

The group entered the living room and sat down. Ash sat his duffle bag down at the end of the couch. Lilia and Calleigh went into the kitchen and returned a while later with a tray of hot tea and sandwiches. Calleigh and Lilia sat down on either side of Ash. The furs sat and talked for a long time. Lilia rose after awhile and fixed dinner. The furs sat down to eat. No fur spoke throughout the meal. Ash and Calleigh exchanged a knowing glance every so often. After dinner, they adjourned to the living room. They all sat in silence until Ash finally spoke up.

"Mom." Ash said.

"Yes, dear." Lilia said stroking Ash's headfur.

"Did I have a brother?" Ash asked.

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Lilia sighed, "Yes, you did."

"What happened to him?"

"The demon killed him that Halloween your father died."

"I had a dream, when I was at our old house. I saw him blast Kordak. Then watched as Kordak blasted him."

"Wait! You say your brother fired an energy blast at Kordak?" Victor asked.

"Yeah." Ash said.

"Did your brother have any special piece of jewelry? A ring, or something like that?"

Victor asked interestedly.

"I don't remember." Ash admitted.

"He didn't. Why?" Lilia offered.

"Well, if he attacked Kordak like you say, then that means that the kit had a self-contained magical power source." Victor explained, "Children like that are rare. A handful may be born every hundred years or so. Which may be a reason Kordak chose you, instead of your brother."

"How do you mean?" Cole asked.

"The magical powers of his brother would have made his body harder to penetrate let alone control. How old was the kit when Kordak killed him?"

"Nine. He would have been ten in three weeks." Lilia said.

"A child with a self-contained magical power source gains complete control and understanding over their abilities at the age of ten. Had the boy reached that age, he might have been able to destroy Kordak then and their."

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“That’s why he killed him. He wasn’t trying to kill my father. He was going for Micah.” Ash said.

Ash looked down and began fidgeting with his father’s Cerberus pendant. He turned it over and looked at the back. There were words carved onto the three necks of the pendant. The middle neck read: Jesse. His father’s name. The far right neck next to the wings read: Ash. The far left neck read: Micah. It had been right in front of him the entire time and he never noticed. Perhaps, it was because Kordak did not want him to know. *Tough luck, friend*, Ash thought. Ash wondered if he should mention the disappearance of his scar. He decided to keep it a secret until he discovered the significance.

“You seem awfully calm for somefur walking around with a demon inside him. What’s up?” Cole said.

“What?” Ash said a tad startled.

“What’s going on up here?” Calleigh said tapping his forehead.

“Nothing. I was just thinking about Micah.” Ash replied.

“Do you have any memories of him?” Lilia asked.

“Only the ones linked to Kordak. The day he invaded me, and the day Micah died. It bothers me.” Ash said.

“It is hard when we lose somefur we love. It is harder when we could have saved them but were unable to do so.” Victor said solemnly.

“I don’t mean to sound harsh or anything, but who have you lost?” Ash asked.

“My son.” Victor said.

“How?” Lilia asked concerned.

“Kordak killed him. His name was Jake. Jake O’Connell.” Victor said.

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“What?” Cole and Calleigh asked simultaneously.

“Oh my God! I’m so sorry.” Ash began but Victor stopped him.

“It is as I said. Kordak killed him, not you. My son acted foolishly, had he used his power ring he might have survived. Forgive me, but I must request a change in subject.” Victor said lowering his head.

“Sure.” Ash said.

Cole looked at Ash, “Did your time away help you come up with anything?”

“How do you mean?” Ash asked.

“Anything bad gonna happen anytime soon?” Cole clarified.

“My dreams seem to indicate some invasion by demonic forces, but I couldn’t say when. Never told anyfur this.” Ash cleared his throat, “That Saturday after Halloween, I flew into the sky and a dark cloud with yellow eyes approached me and told me I had done a good job. I told him where to go and he hit me with a bolt of lightning.”

“What did the cloud want?” Victor asked.

“He wanted me to give him Kordak. Said his name was Clothor, or something like that.” Ash said.

“Clothor the Destroyer?” Victor said.

“Who is he, Victor?” Calleigh asked.

“He is the lord of the demon realms. All of them.” Victor said, “You may be right about the demon invasion, Ash.”

“Crap.” Ash said dropping his head into his paws, “I hate being right all the time.”

“We must be cautious.” Victor said, “The twins should come with me to warn the others and to train.”

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“I want to come, too.” Ash said standing up.

“And, I would be glad to have you,” Victor started, “But, I do not know if the Grand-Master will allow it.”

“Hang the Grand-Master.” Cole said.

“Alright, you may come along. If it is alright with your mother?” Victor said turning to Lilia.

“I’ll be fine, Ash. Go along. Have fun.” Lilia said hugging her son.

“Fun, my dear, is one thing he will not have.” Victor corrected.

“Then let’s go.” Calleigh said cheerfully.



“*IT* is unthinkable for a non-member to be brought within this most sacred temple to the gods of harmony and peace!”

The otter female was positively livid. Victor knelt in front of her, looking in her eyes. Calleigh and Cole also knelt, but they kept their foreheads to the floor. Ash stood silently behind the three warriors and waited. The otter glared at Ash for a minute before returning her gaze to Victor. The Grand-Master rose from her seat and walked closer to the kneeling fur. Victor looked up at her, his expression hard.

“You know the rules, Victor.” She began walking towards Ash, “All those who enter here must be tested.”

The otter femme moved extremely fast and was suddenly behind Ash. Ash turned and swung. He missed, but the otter did not. She kned him in the stomach then grabbed him by his

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coat and threw him across the room. Ash flew through the air. Twisting in midair, he pressed against the wall and kicked off towards his attacker. Rotating so his hindpaws were ahead of him, Ash kicked the otter in the face. She flipped backwards and righted herself and floated above the ground. She vanished. Ash saw her out of the corner of his eye. She swung at his head. Ash ducked to the side.

He dodged all of her subsequent attacks, including once when she swung her tail at his feet. The other three furs looked on in confusion. The Grand-Master stepped back and launched towards Ash. Ash pivoted out of the way and clubbed the otter on the back of the head. As the Grand-Master fell, Ash kicked off and floated up towards the ceiling. The Grand-Master twisted around to face Ash and fire a white energy blast at Ash. In response, Ash threw a blast of blue energy to collide with the incoming blast. The two blasts collided sending a shockwave of energy spreading through the room. Ash floated in the air, a faint blue glow formed around him. The Grand-Master touched down and looked up at Ash, her eyes glazing over.

“Beautiful.” the Grand-Master muttered.

Ash slowly began to drift towards the ground. When his hindpaws touched the ground, a shockwave of energy rippled throughout the large chamber. Ash took a deep breath and relaxed. The blue haze faded and disappeared. Ash looked straight at the Grand-Master. He straightened up and bowed out of respect. The Grand-Master returned the bow. When she stood up, she was actually smiling. Ash’s ears flopped to the side because he was now genuinely perplexed. The otter femme walked over to Ash and placed her paw on his shoulder. She led him out a doorway at the back of the large room. What Ash saw made his eyes go very wide.

Spread out before him, was a vast training area teeming with furs of all different species. There was a special area for weapons training. A large area was set-aside for large groups to

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gather and meditate. There was another area where furs had broken off into pairs to hone their martial art skills. An area with sporadic burst of light told Ash that the area was used for training with the power rings. The Grand-Master led Ash to a wizened old tiger. Ash bowed low before him. The tiger was the fur responsible for the forging of the power rings and imbuing them with their magical properties. The tiger turned out to be one of the few furs born every hundred years that had his magical powers from birth.

His little, impromptu tour of the compound told Ash that he had been accepted as part of this secret group of warriors. By the end of the day, Ash had been given a room to sleep in and clothes to wear. The clothes consisted of a collection of tunics in different styles. Each tunic had a matching pair of pants. The next day, Ash was taken so he could choose a sword. Ash scanned the arsenal of swords and various other deadly weapons. There was a huge sword hanging from the far wall. The blade was at least four feet long and one foot wide.

“No fur could carry that.” Ash said skeptically.

Before the words left his mouth, a grey-brown wolf walked past them and on into the armory. The wolf had striking blue eyes and spiky, blond hair. He walked right up to the large sword and plucked it from the wall like it was nothing. Ash stared in astonishment. The wolf threw the sword across his shoulder and walked towards them. He gave the Grand-Master a courteous bow of his head and left the armory. Ash turned his head and watched the fur leave the armory. Shaking his head, Ash walked further into the armory and browsed the collection of weapons. Ash’s eyes settled on a very nondescript cane sword with four diagonal grooves cut into the hilt. Ash took the sword from the wall and held it in his paws.

“How about this one?” Ash asked.

“Excellent choice.” the Grand-Master mused.

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“Come, Ash. You must get some rest. Tomorrow you begin your training.” Victor said.

“Right.” Ash said.

* * *

ASH wandered through a field of wheat that stretched for miles in every direction. Looking around as he went, Ash watched the wheat flow in the breeze. He heard somefur laughing. Ash began to search for the source of the laughter. He picked up his pace. Ash sniffed the air, hoping to encounter a scent that was either familiar or completely alien to him. No matter how hard he ran or how hard he sought, Ash never seemed to find the source of the jubilation. Ash slowed down and stopped. What if there was a group waiting to ambush him? *Sounds like fun*, Ash thought. He moved forward cautiously. Crouching, Ash pushed apart some wheat stalks and peered through the opening.

“Hello.” a playful voice greeted him.

Ash turned his head right and left. When he looked left, his eyes settled on a foxboy sitting on the ground. Ash ‘s ears flattened out to either side as he stared at the foxboy. The foxboy’s eyes were an odd shade of yellow. They almost seemed to be made from gold. The foxboy grinned at him and began rocking back and forth. Ash stepped into the small clearing. The foxboy rose from the ground. His ears barely came up to Ash’s chin. The fox hit Ash in the chest playfully then motioned for Ash to follow him. Ash walked along beside the foxboy, eyeing him every so often.

“Micah?” Ash asked,

“Yessers.” the foxboy replied, “How’ve you been, Ash?”

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“Good. You?”

“Mm, can’t complain. Being dead is kinda fun.”

“Micah!”

“What? Too harsh.”

Ash closed his eyes and hung his head. Micah’s expression did not change. The smile never left his face.

“I don’t blame you. I never have, Ash.”

“But, the way you talk about it, it’s just...”

“Ash. It’s over. You couldn’t change it if you wanted to. Don’t dwell on it. Besides, Mom needs you more than I do.”

“I just... I...”

“Take your time.”

“I killed you and then forgot about you.”

“What d’you mean?”

“I had completely forgotten I had even had a brother until a couple months back! How can I be forgiven for that?”

“No need to shout. I have big ears for a reason, bro.”

“Sorry.”

“The whole forgetting thing was probably the demon trying to hide something from you. How goes that, anyhow?”

“What?”

“The demon.”

“Oh. Yeah, about that.”

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Micah stopped walking. The grin faded from his face and it was replaced by a look of concern. The scenery changed with his expression. The skies darkened and the wheat field became barren rocky expanse. Micah's bright colored clothes turned to grey.

"What's wrong? Is the demon taking over?"

"What? No! I'm pretty sure it's the other way around."

Everything reverted back to brightness and life when the grin appeared on Micah's face again.

"Okay, Micah. That's just cool."

"I know. So, what happened?"

"I haven't quite figured it out yet. But, you remember the scar I had?"

"Yeah?"

"It's gone."

"Awesome! Can I see?"

Ash lifted up his shirt. The scar was indeed nowhere to be seen. Micah leaned in and reached out with one paw. A sly expression appeared on his muzzle. Both of Micah's paws shot out and began to tickle his brother's exposed abdomen. Ash jerked backwards and lost his balance and fell over. Micah dropped to his knees beside Ash and continued to tickle him. Ash rolled away from his brother and sat up. Still laughing, Ash looked back at his brother. Micah sat on the ground and chuckled to himself.

"You remember how we used to chase each other around the front yard?" Micah asked.

"Vaguely, but it's coming back to me little by little." Ash said.

"That's good. Anyway, it was so much fun. We'd start. I'd chase you then you'd chase me."

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“God, I wish I could remember these things.”

“Don’t worry. It’ll all come back to you in time,” Micah looked at an invisible watch on his wrist, “Oh, look at the time. I should be off.”

“Do you really?”

“Yeah. We’ll see each other again. Eventually.”

* * *

ASH opened his eye. Sitting up, he pushed the covers off of him and got out of the bed. Ash walked out onto the small balcony of his quarters. Looking out, a cool breeze ruffled his fur. The sun rose slowly over the mountains. A light fog hung over the entire compound. All was calm. In the calmness of the valley, Ash uttered only a single word.

“Micah.”

* * *

THE moon rose high over the compound. It had been several months since Ash began his training. He had been given to Victor as a third pupil. Ash still had not said anything to the others about his suspicions over the demon. He believed he had narrowed down the possibilities of what happened, but was not sure how to put them into words. Ash looked left and saw Calleigh. She glanced over and smiled then returned to her training. Ash decided to return to his. He looked down at his paw to make sure of his grip.

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Ash was balancing himself on the tip of his sword. When he looked down, Ash saw the ground and the rock the sword was in. His paw was gripped around the pommel of his katana. Ash's hindpaws stuck straight up in the air. Victor walked around him, scrutinizing his posture. Once, Victor moved in and flicked Ash on the nose. Ash almost fell over, but he recovered. Ash looked pointedly at Victor, who just grinned and continued to pace around Ash. Victor stopped and moved off to one side. Victor opened his mouth and uttered a single word:

“Now!”

Grinning, Ash replied, “Nice try, old man. Your orders were to relax when you said....”

Before Ash could finish, the grey wolf with the blond hair from the armory came running out of the brush. He swung his oversized sword around like it weighed nothing at all. Behind the wolf came Cole. Cole was twirling his short swords around him as he ran. Ash glanced over and Calleigh was rising from the ground with her sai. She came at him.

“Crap!”

Ash bent his elbow then straightened it quickly to launch himself into the air. He plowed into his attackers hindpaws first. Ash ducked a slash from the blond wolf and parried an attack from Cole. The clang of the blades rang through the forest. Victor hung back along the edge of the clearing and watched the four canids. The blond wolf stabbed at Ash. Ash jumped up onto the flat of the huge sword and somersaulted over the stunned canid. Ash landed on the ground but had to jump up again as the blond wolf swung the sword around at his ankles. While still in the air, Ash kicked his legs forward and he caught the blond wolf in the chest with his hindpaws.

The blond wolf stumbled backwards. Calleigh flipped over the tumbling wolf and flew towards Ash with her sai held ready. Calleigh slashed at Ash with her sai, a look of sadistic pleasure on her muzzle. Ash rolled his eyes as he dodged and parried the blows. Ash managed

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to relieve Calleigh of her sai, but she responded by drawing her own sword. They swung together and locked blades. They struggled against one another for a while. Ash pushed with all of his strength and sent Calleigh hurtling backwards. Calleigh pulled off a back flip in midair and pressed against a tree and launched at Ash. Ash coiled and leapt over the flying wolfgirl. Their swords clanged together briefly, but neither landed a hit.

Calleigh hit the ground and rolled to her feet. Ash twisted around and pressed against the same tree Calleigh had. Ash looked around and saw an enormous tree towering above the rest. Deciding to change the arena, Ash pushed off the tree in the direction of the tree. The three wolves exchange exasperated glances then gave chase. The blond wolf flew ahead of the others and held the huge sword down by his side. Ash looked behind him and saw the blond wolf hurtling towards him. The wolf picked up speed and began twirling the sword in front of him. Streams of green, blue and purple energy began to pour from the blade and trail behind the wolf. Still too far away to even hope to do any damage, the blond wolf swung the sword in a forwards slash.

Ash leaned back away from the oncoming wave of energy. Twisting around, Ash stopped and watched as the blast streaked off towards the massive tree. The other furs came up around Ash and watched. The wave of energy soared through the air. Ash floated a little ways closer. As the blast neared, a bolt of lightning sped from the nearest branch of the tree and collided with the blast. There was a bright explosion. A shower of glowing blue, green and purple particles fell on the forest below. Ash moved to fly at the tree when Victor placed a warning paw on his shoulder. Ash turned and looked back at Victor and the others. Ash looked back towards the tree. An ominous feeling crept over his entire body, as if he was somehow connected to the tree.

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“I have to.” Ash said.

Without waiting for an answer, Ash sped off towards the massive tree. As he gained speed, blue energy began to stream along behind him. He neared the range the energy wave had been at when it was blasted. Nothing. Ash turned 90° upwards and flew vertically into the myriad of leaves above him. Calleigh would swear later that the energy surrounding Ash had formed into the shape of two large wings as he sped upwards. Once inside the tree, Ash discovered a large chamber. The chamber was completely empty save for a single horsefur huddled in the center of the chamber, naked. Ash walked towards the fur, glancing in all directions to see if he was being watched. He was being watched. There were strange creatures swinging in the branches all around them.

“Who are you?” the fur said.

“My name’s Ash,” Ash said, “What’s your name?”

“I am...” the fur blanched, “It has been so long, I cannot remember. I have been trapped in this second-rate Hell for thousands of years, at least.”

“Who put you here?”

“That damned fool angel. The one they call Un.”

“An angel? Then what are you?”

“I’m a demon, dear kit. What? You expected something different?”

“Well, to be honest, I was expecting glowing eyes and leathery wings.”

“There is a curse on this place that does not allow me to access my powers. I am trapped in this useless, weak form.”

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Ash felt a strange energy signature emanating from the horse. For the first time, the horse turned his head and looked at Ash. The look in his eyes changed from loneliness to curiosity.

“How did you get in here?”

“I flew in.”

“You were not hindered by the defenses?”

“If you mean the lightning bolts, then no, I wasn’t.”

“Only he could have done so. Did Un send you?”

“No, he didn’t. I’ve never met anyfur called Un.”

The horse began to rise from the ground. A breeze began to flow through the room. The breeze started out soft then began to pick up speed. By the time the horse was standing upright, the wind was almost a gale. Ash’s clothes and his tail were flapping about uncontrollably. The horse’s naked body was now covered in blood red leather. Two large sickles appeared in the horse’s hands. The horse stretched his neck; there was an audible crack as he tilted his head to either side. When he was finished stretching, the horse grinned at Ash. The horse vanished. Ash began to spin around, searching for the horse.

“Fuck, I’m gonna die.”

Two diagonal gashes appeared across his back. Ash stumbled forward and dropped to one knee. He felt blood running down his back underneath his tunic. Slowly and painfully, Ash rose to his hindpaws and held his sword ready. His eyes darted around searching for the demonic horsefur. Ash felt something breeze past him. He swung his sword around to hit it, but there was nothing behind him. Then it happened. In rapid succession, twenty gashes of varying

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sizes opened up all over his body. One slice took off his tail. Another took off part of his left ear. The final slash was across Ash's throat as he threw his head back in pain.

Ash fell forwards onto his knees. Blood spilled from all his open wounds forming a large pool underneath him. The horse reappeared and stood over Ash as he gasped for air. The horse pushed Ash over on his side with his hoof. Ash rolled onto his back, his right arm stretched out beside him, palm up. The horse saw the mark of Ash's paw. A look of absolute revulsion appeared on the demon's face. He knelt down over Ash. Laying one sickle on the ground, the demon grabbed Ash by his collar and lifted him a little off the ground.

"You told me you had nothing to do with Un. For this treachery, I shall have to kill you. Goodbye, little fox."

The horse let go of Ash and picked up his sickle. With this weapon, the horse severed Ash's right paw from his arm. Ash tried to scream in pain. Blood spurted from his wrist. As Ash writhed on the floor, the demon fur rose. Standing over him, the horse raised the sickle in his right hand over his head and prepared to bring it down into Ash's skull. Ash suddenly felt strength flow through him. Glaring up at the demon, Ash kicked upwards with his right leg. His hindpaw connected with the small of the horse's back. The demon stumbled forward and away from Ash. Ash sat up carefully and reached over and grabbed his severed paw.

Sitting up on his knees, Ash held his paw where it had been. A faint, blue halo appeared around his paw and lower arm. Ash's finger began to twitch then he could clench his fist. When he did, blue energy washed over his entire body. The energy glowed so brightly that Ash was obstructed from the horse's view for a brief time. The horse looked away and spotted Ash's tail where it had fallen. It began to glow as well, but when the glow subsided it was gone. The

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same thing happened to the part of his ear that had been removed. The horse readied his sickles and rushed Ash.

Ash opened his eyes and the bright glow vanished. The demon vanished again as he neared Ash. On instinct, Ash rotated left and swung his fist. His fist connected with something invisible. The horse reappeared as he was flung across the room by the force of the punch. The demon horse rose and ran at Ash again, this time he was swinging his sickles wildly at Ash. Ash ducked away from each swing with the greatest of ease. The horse moved to bring the two sickles in from either side. Ash reached up and grabbed the fur's wrists and held his arms steady. Ash brought both his legs up and kicked the demon full in the chest. This time, it was Ash's turn to pull a vanishing act.

Ash reappeared behind the demon with his sword in paw. The demon fur twisted around in midair. He came face-to-face with Ash, his eyes glowing bright blue. There was a soft squelching sound as Ash pushed the sword through the demon's gut. The energy that surrounded Ash funneled through his paws and into the blade of the sword. The blade glowed brightly. The demon's body started to burn right around the wound. Then, slowly at first, the demon fur was entirely consumed by blue flames. Ash let the sword drop to his side. Blue energy continued to emanate from the blade. Ash replaced the sword in its sheath and left the treetop prison.

END PART 2