

FALLING ASH

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The following contains content of an adult nature, including, but not limited to, adult language and content and fantasy violence

If you have comments, send them to ashen.angelfox@gmail.com.

PART 2

HARRY opened the door to the lab building. Two men about his age stood in the doorway. The shorter of the two wore a black leather jacket and had short blond hair. The other man was taller by a few inches. He wore a brown jacket and had longish black hair. The two men walked into the building at Harry's invitation. The shorter one looked around at the equipment and just bobbed his head up and down. The other man looked at Harry with a strange, half-amused look on his face. Harry smiled back at him then walked over to the other man.

"Sean?" Harry said,

"Yeah?" the man said turning.

"I want to thank you guys for coming up here." Harry began, "I think I have something here that's right up your alley."

"What do you mean, Harry?" the other man asked.

"Well, Dan, I have someone here that says he's from another dimension and that a demon sent him here."

"A demon?" Sean asked.

"Did he say anything about the demon?" Dan asked.

"I didn't ask him. I figured I'd get you guys up here first. C'mon. I'll introduce you."

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Harry turned and walked towards a door in the back of the building. He stopped at the door before opening it. He glanced over his shoulder at Sean and Dan. He knew that Sean was prone to shooting first and asking questions later. He was hoping Dan would be able to stop him, or that he had not become just like his brother. Harry opened the door and walked in. Sean and Dan followed him in. Ash sat with his legs folded on the floor. He was sitting so the three men could see his profile. His nine tails whipped around on the floor. Ash opened his eyes and looked up at Harry. He rose from the floor when he saw the other two humans. The two new men stepped around Harry and aimed two guns at his chest. Ash sighed to himself.

Ash raised his paws and looked at the two men. They pulled back the hammers to cock the guns. In that instance, Ash's paws shot out and seized the men's hands and the guns they held. He twisted his wrists and rotated the guns from the men's grips. In one deft move, Ash had relieved the men of their firearms and had them aimed back at their faces. The two men looked at him. The shorter one looked a tad angry, while the taller seemed more impressed than scared. Ash pressed the button to let the clips drop from the guns. Then, very carefully, he simultaneously pulled back the slides of the two guns, ejecting the bullets in the chambers. Once the guns were rendered harmless, Ash handed them back to their owners. Ash turned his back on the three men and walked to the cot against the far wall.

"I don't appreciate having guns stuck in my face." Ash informed them.

"This thing talks!" Sean exclaimed.

"Yes, he does." Harry said stepping forward, "Ash. These are the two friends I said I was going to call. This is Sean and Dan Browning. Guys, this is Ash Reynolds. Our visitor from another dimensional plane. Or, something like that."

"Sorry about that." Dan said.

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“You were just being cautious.” Ash said off-handedly.

“What are you?” Sean asked.

“Sean!” Dan hissed.

“It’s okay,” Ash said putting on his shirt, “I’m a fox. Can’t ya tell?”

“Well, yeah, but you’re all...” Sean began.

“All what?” Ash asked.

“Humanoid?” Dan offered.

“Yeah.” Sean said.

“Where I come from, everyfur looks like this.” Ash said.

“You live in a world full of humanoid foxes?” Sean said.

“I think he means that everybody is a humanoid animal. Lots of different species. Am I close?” Dan said.

“Very. You can pretty much name a type of animal and there’d be a fur just like it. There’re even some hybrids species you’ve probably never seen.”

“Such as?” Sean asked.

“I know a guy whose father is a tiger and his mother is a rabbit.”

“Interesting.” Dan said.

“You should see him. He looks like a rabbit with orange fur and black stripes.”

“How’d you get here?” Dan asked.

“A demon attacked me and sent me here.”

“Can you describe this demon?” Sean asked.

“Yeah.”

“Hold on. Let me go get my computer.” Dan said.

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“Grab Dad’s journal, while you’re out there.” Sean called after his brother.

While they waited, Sean picked up the two clips and the loose bullets. He slipped the bullets back into the clips. He set one clip down on the table, and slid the other back into his gun. He pulled back the slide and loaded the first bullet into the chamber. He replaced the gun inside his jacket then folded his arms across his chest. Ash watched him carefully. Ash sat down on the edge of the cot. Sean watched the tips of Ash’s nine tails move around behind him. Ash looked into the man’s eyes and found him very hard to read. He would have to keep an eye on this Sean human at all times. Ash could not predict what he might do. Dan returned with his computer. Ash stood up from the cot. He felt a slight twinge of pain in his left shoulder. He shrugged it off, but then the whole left side of his body began to hurt. Ash grunted in pain and fell to his knees.

“Are you okay?” Dan asked.

“It feels like my shoulder’s been dislocated.” Ash said through gritted teeth.

* * *

CALLEIGH led Lilia and Cole to where Jesse sat. The nurse Calleigh had asked to watch him moved away silently when she saw the three canids approach. Jesse rose from the chair and took his wife into his arms. Calleigh glanced over at Cole. He gave her a tiny smile then looked around the crowd hospital floor. Calleigh knew what he was looking for and pointed towards the room Micah was in. The door was closed. There was also a police officer standing outside the room.

“What’s with the cop?” Cole asked.

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“Don’t know. He wasn’t there when I left.” Calleigh muttered.

Jesse and Lilia had moved off and were sitting with their heads together. Calleigh and Cole decided to give them some space. The twins moved off and stood where they could see the cop and the door. They watched the horse cop as shifted his weight from one hoof to the other. The cop also watched the twins watching him. Another cop walked up to him. His partner, more than likely. This new cop was female tiger. She looked just as scary as the first cop. Cole shot Calleigh a sidelong glance. Calleigh returned it with a hint of worry. Cole turned and began walking away. Calleigh looked at the two police officers then followed her brother down the hall. The twins walked in silence for a long time. Cole finally stopped. Calleigh walked around in front of him and looked her brother in the eyes.

“Do you think they’re connected?” Cole asked.

“What do you mean?” Calleigh replied.

“Ash’s disappearance and Micah’s being attacked.”

“They have to be.”

“Okay. Just wanted to make sure I wasn’t going crazy.”

“What I don’t understand is, if it was the same monster, why it didn’t send to another dimension or just outright kill him? Why leave him alive?”

“Good question. It’d be crazy to think this monster had anything even remotely resembling compassion, wouldn’t it?”

“Anything’s possible at this point.”

“How you holdin’ up?”

“I miss Ash.”

“I know. Come here.”

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Cole stood with his arms opened to his sister. Calleigh walked to him and hugged him. Calleigh remembered how she and Cole had first met Ash. She remembered how she had immediately fallen in love with Ash the moment he smiled at her. She thought back over the past two years at all the stuff they had done. She remembered a trip they had all taken fall one year ago. Ash and his family had gone out with Calleigh and her brothers to just relax and have fun. Calleigh remembered how they had sat on a bridge while Jesse and Lilia took pictures of them. She remembered that day as the first time she had kissed Ash in front of anyfur. Calleigh remembered other days she had spent with Ash. Then her thoughts turned to Micah. The young fox lay in a hospital room surrounded by doctors and nurses. He could die. Calleigh buried her face in the fur on her twin's head and began to cry. Cole just held her. He stroked her hair and whispered to his distraught sister. He did not tell her to stop crying, or to be strong. Cole told her to let it all out

"I'm sorry about this. I probably look like a fool."

"Don't worry. Just let it out. I may not know what you're going through the way you do, but I got a pretty good idea."

"You know, you're supposed to tell me not to cry. You're supposed to say, 'be strong, Calleigh'. You know, say something deep and sentimental."

"Right. You know me, I suck at being deep and sentimental."

"I'm glad I have you. And, the others. I think I'd have lost it completely by now if it weren't for all of you standing by me."

"Well, now there's a fur that needs all of us to stand by him right now."

"Cassie."

"Okay, I was thinking more along the lines of Micah, but..."

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“No, dufus. Cassie’s coming this way.”

Cole and Calleigh let go of each other. Calleigh wiped the tears from her eyes and out of her fur. Cole turned and looked down the hall they had come. Sure enough, a panther girl was trotting their way. Cole watched and say there were tears streaming from her eyes. Cole’s heart was aching; Calleigh’s was flat shattering. Cassie ran up to them and right into Calleigh. Calleigh wrapped her arms around the sobbing feline. A muffle howl of pain drifted towards them from around the corner. Cassie whipped her head around and gasped. Calleigh let go of her and the three set off down the hall. When they came around the corner, they saw the two police officers preventing Jesse from entering the room. Jesse was arguing vehemently with the two officers who refused to let him in. Jesse made to swing at the horse, but a muscular black panther grabbed him. The panther pulled Jesse back to the wall and held him there. Lilia stood in front of the cop and apologized for her husband.

“That wouldn’t help your son, Jesse.” the panther said.

“You’re right, Paul.” Jesse said.

The panther was Paul Archer, Cassie’s father. Cassie walked over and looked up at her father. He smiled at her and put his arm around her shoulders. Calleigh walked over to Jesse and touched his arm gently. The door to Micah’s room opened and the doctor stepped out. There was blood on his scrubs and the mask that hung around his neck. The gorilla rubbed his two massive hands together and sighed. He muttered something to the two police officers. They listened to what the doctor said then nodded and walked off. The door opened again. Another doctor and three nurses exited. The last fur to leave was pushing a cart. On the cart, there was a metal bowl filled cotton balls and gauze pads. All of them were red with blood.

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The doctor motioned to the concerned furs and led them into the room. Micah lay on the bed, motionless. There were all kinds of machines surrounding him. There was an incessant beeping coming from one of them that told them Micah was alive. There were bloody bandages wrapped around his head. Cassie walked over and looked at Micah's still form. Part of his left ear was missing. His left eye was swollen shut. The doctor spoke, but his words were lost on the catgirl. Cassie placed one paw on Micah's arm. She stroked the fur there and watched as plasma ran from a small bag into Micah's arm. The doctor mentioned the howl from earlier. Cassie swiveled one ear around and listened to what the doctor had to say.

“Your son's left shoulder had been dislocated. When we relocated it, he woke up and, well, you heard what happened after that.”

* * *

ASH paced around the room while he waited. Dan, the younger of the brothers, had gotten his laptop. Sean sat across from his brother and fidgeted with his gun. He kept his eyes on Ash the entire time. Harry had left. He had to make his rounds through the zoo. Dan was accessing a database of demons, monsters and other supernatural things that he had compiled. Ash did not press too much as to how he had come across the information. He glanced down curiously at a leather-bound journal that Dan had brought back from their car. Dan explained to Ash that he was setting up the system so that they could go through it and only view the images. Dan worked for a few more minutes then motioned Ash over.

Ash walked over and stood behind Dan. Sean watched Ash closely. He held his gun ready to use if Ash tried anything. Dan began to scroll through the impossibly long string of

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images. There were pictures for hundred's of different kinds of supernatural monsters and demons. There were artist's renders, cave drawings and wooden statues depicting the different takes on some of the creatures. Ash glanced over at Sean and flashed him a smile. Sean returned the taunting grin and waved at Ash with the Colt pistol. Ash smirked then turned his attention back on the computer's monitor. Dan glanced back over his shoulder at Ash to say that he was ready. Ash nodded and Dan began scrolling through the large batch of images.

Ash watched as Dan sifted through what seem like hundreds of images of varying degrees of quality. His keen fox eyes scanned the myriad of images as they blinked across the screen. Ash leaned in closer, placing one paw on the back of the chair and the other flat on the table. He noticed that Dan seemed slightly anxious. Ash smirked to himself.

“Look, you are a handsome devil, but I don't swing that way, sorry.” Ash joked.

“That wasn't what was bothering me, but now that you mention it...” Dan shifted in his seat.

“Would you two like to be alone?” Sean asked dryly.

Ash and Dan glared up at Sean then looked back at the computer. Images of strange creatures continued to appear on the screen. Ash recognized a few from his own misadventures. Some of the supernatural entities seemed strange, but the names were familiar. After a few such moments, Ash realized that the creatures in this world must resemble the human inhabitants, where the ones in his resembled furs. Ash could not help but think that the human's version of Bloody Mary looked a little like a childish prank gone wrong. Ash fought to stifle a laugh when a photo of a tribal carving flashed on the screen. The carving depicted a four-armed creature with a long, curving tail. The tail ended in four large spiked, equidistant from one another. The image vanished from the screen.

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“Stop.” Ash said.

“What?” Dan started.

“Go back one.”

“You find it?” Sean asked from across the table.

“I think so,” Ash studied the image, “Yeah, that’s definitely it.”

“Okay, so what do we know about it, Danmy?” Sean asked.

Dan pulled something up on his computer and scrolled for a moment. Dan sighed and sat back in the chair.

“Jack shit.” Dan answered.

“What do you mean?” Ash said.

“I mean that even the Indian tribe that carved the statue didn’t have a name for it.” Dan sighed, “Except for a very detailed description and a couple of aliases, we’ve got nothing.”

“So, we don’t even know what to call it?” Sean asked incredulously.

“Right.” Dan asked.

“Well, there’s got to be a legend that goes along with this statue, right?” Ash asked.

“Good thinking.” Dan said leaning over the keyboard of his computer, “Well, I don’t know if this helps us, or what?”

“Why?” Ash asked.

“What’d ya get?” Sean asked.

“I found one page with quite an extensive article of a mysterious monster. Problem is, the article contains bits and pieces from about six separate tribes from two different continents,” Dan began, “The information’s broken. I really don’t know how much help it’s gonna be.”

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“Well, read through it and just blurt anything that might be helpful in finding and destroying it.” Ash said, “Please?”

“Alright. I will.” Dan nodded.

“I’ll look through this,” said Sean, holding the leather-bound journal, “You look like you could use a rest.”

“Well, if you can take it from here, I think I will lie down for a bit.”

“Knock yourself out.” Sean shouted after him.

Ash walked into the back room and flopped down on the cot. He stared at the ceiling for a while. His thoughts drifted to Calleigh and Micah. He looked at the mark on his paw. Ash caught himself wondering if the angel was more of a curse, than a gift. Ash shook his head.

“Calleigh.” he muttered.



CASSIE sat in a cold, hospital room and listened to the various beeps and noises coming from the machines hooked up to Micah’s unconscious body. Nurses and doctors came and went. Some offered words of comfort, while others walked in took one look at a few monitors and walked out. Cassie wondered if any of them even really cared. Cassie and her father had offered to stay with Micah until he got better. Jesse and Lilia had agreed. It seemed to Cassie that something was going to happen. Something bad. Cassie rubbed her side gingerly. She had a burn there that had been aching for the past week or so. She had never told Micah about the burn. She just was not sure if he could possibly understand how complicated the story was. Only her father and

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mother knew. Her mother knew more well than anyfur possibly could. She had died when Cassie was scarred.

Cassie sat in silence. She watched Micah's chest rise and fall gently. She wondered what was going on inside Micah's head, if anything. The doctor said that he was in a coma. Nothing was said about when, or if, he would ever wake up. A nurse came in every few minutes to check the bandages. She would smile and greet Cassie every time, but Cassie just sat there. She never said a word. She only sat and stroked the fur on Micah's arm. Calleigh stopped by once before they all went home. She understood some of Cassie's emotions better than any of the others. Cassie was impressed by Calleigh's strength. Though nothing was said, Calleigh had lost Ash. He could be dead. Micah was lying right in front of them, unconscious, but alive. When Calleigh left, Cassie was truly alone with Micah for the first time since this whole mess began.

"I want to tell you something," she said to Micah, "It's something I should have told you a long time ago, but I didn't know how to say it. I was afraid you'd think I was out of my mind, and you would leave me. I just wish you could hear me."

Cassie fell silent and listened. There was only the incessant beeping that told her that Micah was still alive.

"I want to tell you how I got this scar on my side. It happened right here in this hospital. It was the day I was being born. There were some complications. No fur saw it come in. It was invisible. It was also a demon. The demon tried to enter my mother's body. When it couldn't, it killed her and branded me. I shouldn't have remembered anything that happened that early, but one day I just knew that it did. I just knew that's how I'd gotten this scar. I hope you can forgive me for not telling you before. Micah, I still love you."

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Cassie began to cry. She buried her head in her paws and sobbed. She was sure to lose Micah because she had kept this from him. After all, how was she supposed to expect Micah to believe such an outrageous story about demons? If it were not for the mark on her side, she would have chalked the vision up to a stressful day. Cassie sat up and took a deep breath. She wiped the tears from her eyes. She rose and walked outside to get a cup of water. She filled the cup and walked back into the room. Cassie took her chair again. She sipped at the water until it was gone. She stared down at the empty plastic cup. A glow came from the underside of the two bracelets she wore. The glow moved to the cup and it became a plastic figurine in the likeness of Micah. There was a shuffling behind her as the door opened. Cassie swung her head around. Her eyes widened in fear when she saw who had opened the door.

“What the hell was that?” Paul Archer said entering the room.

“Daddy?!” Cassie breathed.

* * *

ASH stuffed the felt case holding the necklace he had gotten for Calleigh into the pocket on the inside of his jacket. Dan was leaning over his computer. Sean was sitting in a chair using a rather large knife to pick underneath his fingernails. Ash laid the jacket across the table and looked down at his right paw. The mark there burned a little. Ash noticed Sean and Dan were both watching him, so he decided to try and worry them a bit. He stretched out his fingers so that his claws extended outward. Sean lowered his knife and stared, while Dan leaned back from his computer a little more.

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“So, where is this person we’re going to see?” Ash asked, startling the two back to reality.

“Some back-water town down in the Carolina’s somewhere,” Sean said, “According to Dad’s journal, the man has experience with dimensional travel. Don’t get your hopes up, though.”

“Why not?” Ash looked from Sean to Dan, “Do you not trust your own father?”

“Well, you see,” Dan began, “We sorta found out recently that our father was prone to making some very bad mistakes from time to time.”

“Look, Ash, I just don’t want you to be emotionally shattered if we find out this guy’s just another whack job. So, really, by telling you that I’m looking...”

Sean was cut off by the sound of a cell phone ringing. Dan stood up and looked at his brother. Sean reached into his back pocket and pulled out a cell-phone. He flipped it open and put it to his ear.

“Hello? Jesse, is that you? What’s goin’ on? No, wait. Wait. Slow down. Now’s now a good time...what? Well, we’re in the middle of.... Okay, okay! Fine, we’ll check it out.”

Sean pulled the phone away from his ear and eyed it with disgust. The person on the other end had hung up on him.

“What is it?” Dan asked.

“That was Jesse. Says there’s a large gathering of vampires somewhere in Kentucky of highway 127.” Sean said, “He wants us to check it out.”

“What about Ash?” Dan protested.

“Dan, were you not paying attention or did you not hear me trying to tell him we were kinda busy?”

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“Hey, guys, look. Kentucky’s on the way to the Carolina’s, right?” Ash asked.

“Yeah.” Sean replied.

“Look, let’s just drop by and have a look. Besides, I think I need something to take my mind off my present situation.”

“What do you think, Sean?” Dan said to his brother.

“You sure about this, Ash?” Sean asked the fox.

“Not really, but your friend seemed pretty insistent.” Ash said, “And, I hate disappointing people.”

Sean did not respond, but merely shrugged. Dan started packing up his computer. Sean was heading for the door when it flew open and Harry and Julie burst into the room. They looked as if they had run from one end of the zoo to the get to the lab building. Julie shut the door behind them and locked it. Ash and the brothers gave them confused stares until they had caught their breath enough to tell them what was going on.

“The director...is...coming...” Harry stammered.

“He found out we were hiding you up here.” Julie added.

“He’s coming to see if you got rid of me, right?” Ash asked

Harry and Julie nodded together. Ash looked around to Dan, then over to his brother. A wry grin flashed across Sean’s face, but was gone as soon as it had appeared. Sean raised his hands and motioned for the others to stay where they were. Ash gave Dan a quizzical look, to which Dan responded with a raised eyebrow. After a few minutes, Sean returned followed closely by the director of the zoo. Sean carried a pair of cuffs in his hands. He crossed the room and grabbed a muzzle from one of the shelves. He shot Ash a look that said, *just-play-along*.

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“So, like I was saying.” Sean said to the director, “We’re from the CDC. Dr. Richardson here called us and told us about this creature you have here.”

“Why would you call the CDC, Richardson?” the director asked.

“He was just being cautious,” Sean said, “This thing could be carrying God knows what. If he stays here any longer, the people that work here, and maybe even some of the animals you have here, could become infected and that could lead to an epidemic. You should be congratulating Dr. Richardson for calling us. If there were an epidemic and it came out that it was started by this creature in your zoo, I think I’d just have to kill myself after that.”

The director went white as a sheet. Sean walked over to Ash and placed the cuffs on his wrists then secured the muzzle over his snout. Sean and Dan lead Ash out and put him in the back seat of their car. Continuing the charade, Sean pulled out his phone and faked a call to the CDC headquarters. Ash turned his head and looked back at Harry, Julie and the director. Ash smiled to himself when the director gave Harry a congratulatory clap on the shoulder. When they were far enough away that they could not be seen, Dan reached around and removed the cuffs and muzzle.

“That was quick thinking there, Sean.” Ash commented rubbing his wrists, “Did you have to put the cuffs on so tightly, though?”

“Couldn’t be helped. Had to make it look good, Ash.” Sean responded.

“Right.” Ash said.

“Say, Ash, can you drive a car?” Sean asked.

Dan turned his head slowly to look at his brother.

“Yeah, why?” Ash said.

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“Well, it’s a long way to the Carolina’s from here, and I just thought that instead of making stops at hotels and stuff and trying to hide you, we could just switch out if I get too tired and you could take over for a while.”

“Sean?” Dan interrupted, “Are you feeling okay?”

“Yeah, why?” Sean said puzzled.

“No reason.” Dan said.

Ash chuckled under his breath and looked out the window at the buildings and people as they drove through the town. Ash and the brothers rode in total silence until they were out of the city. Sean picked up a cassette tape and put it into the player on the dashboard. Ash leaned his head back against the leather and listened to the music coming from the speakers. The song playing Ash recognized as a song Micah listened to. Ash asked about the name of the band. Blue Öyster Cult. Micah’s favorite rock band. *So, apparently names are the same, but faces are very different*, Ash thought. Ash watched as the scenery changed and as day became night. Sean drove for several hours without even complaining. He drove the car all the way to their destination in Kentucky.

They parked the car just off a deserted back road. Dan and Sean got out and walked around to the trunk. Ash met them behind the car and stare wide-eyed at the assortment of weapons and tools. Sean picked up a gun and loaded it with a clip full of silver bullets. Ash took the gun and pulled the slide back to load the first bullet into the chamber. The three hunters then turned and walked towards the abandoned barn where they would find the vampires they sought. Ash looked all around him as they walked. His ears swiveled around to listen to sounds coming from all directions.

“This isn’t a good idea,” Dan muttered.

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“Why didn’t say so before?” Sean snarled.

“I did say so before!” Dan growled back.

“Hey! Be quiet.” Ash said, “We’re being followed.”

Before Sean or Dan could argue with Ash, a band of vampires jumped them. The vampires disarmed them then led them around to the front of the barn. Ash and the brothers were forced down on their knees in front of the barn. There was a tall human male with pale skin standing before them. He smiled at Dan and Sean, but eyed Ash confusedly.

“Glad you could join us, boys.” the vampire said.

“You knew we were coming?” Dan asked.

“Of course, we did,” began the vampire, “How do you think your friend Jesse found out about all of this?”

“You gave him the information to lure us here?!” Sean asked.

“Why would he go along with it?” Dan puzzled.

“We have his wife and unborn child, that’s why.” the vampire chuckled.

“Where’s Jesse?” Sean demanded.

“At home, awaiting notice that you have shown up and his part in this is over,” the vampire started walking towards Ash, “However, I’m inclined to alter the deal slightly because he did not warn us of this creature traveling with you. What is it?”

Ash glared up into the vampire’s cold eyes. The vampire bared his fangs and hissed at Ash. Ash growled and started rise from the ground. The vampire reacted and punched the rising fox in the face. Ash collapsed to the ground. He had not counted on the vampire’s increased strength. Ash heard the vampire muttering to himself as he walked back towards the brothers.

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“I knew we should have made it clear to Reynolds not to let the brothers bring anybody else with them.”

“It makes no difference. Besides,” a new female voice said, “I wonder how he tastes?”

* * *

CALLEIGH sat in a close circle with her brothers, Jesse and Victor. They were trying to come up with a plan to get Ash back. Victor was informing the group on the latest news concerning the creature that had taken Ash from them.

“We’ve completely lost it,” Victor said, “There’s no sign of that monster anywhere. Three seeker groups searched the entire mountain range. They found nothing. There isn’t much left we can do. Except, hope Ash can find his way back to us.”

“We can’t give up, now!” Calleigh exclaimed, “We have to do something! We almost lost Micah to this thing, too! After he did what none of us could, you just wanna give up!? I can’t believe what I’m hearing! Jesse, you his father, for God’s sake!”

“Calleigh!” Cole snarled at his sister.

“What would you have me do, Calleigh?” Jesse asked, “If we tried anything with only the information we have, we could all die! Now, how would that help Ash? Tell me.”

Calleigh sat in silence. Jesse was right and she knew it. It made her furious to think that a single demon could have taken Ash, almost killed Micah and still remain completely hidden from them. Calleigh would not have thought it possible that one monster could hide from them so well. Flustered, Calleigh rose from the floor and walked to the window. There was not much

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to see as a heavy snowstorm had rolled in a short time ago. Cole stood up and walked to the window and stood beside his twin. Cole put his arm around her shoulders and squeezed.

“Hey, there.” Cole soothed, “We’ll find Ash and get this demon.”

“How can you be so sure?” Calleigh asked.

“I’m not as sure as you might think,” Cole began, “We could get the demon first, if you’d like.”

“Damn you, Cole.” Calleigh said exasperated with her brother’s optimism.

“Whoa! Damned by my own sister! What do you say to that?” Cole gasped.

“Ooh! You better lay down, Cole.” Zach said jokingly.

“Hmm, you think so?” Cole said, “Calleigh? You okay?”

“Yeah, my neck just hurts a bit.”

“Where? Let me see.”

Calleigh indicated an area on the right side of her neck where the pain was. Cole walked around behind her and began rubbing her neck. As Cole rubbed his paw over the spot Calleigh had indicated, he felt two small bumps on the skin under her fur. He asked her where they had come from, but Calleigh did not know. Calleigh reached up and rubbed the bumps. When she touched them, the pain became worse.

“It feels like there’re two needles stuck in the side of my neck.” Calleigh admitted.

* * *

ASH stood in the center of a darkened room. Blood flowed from the numerous scars across Ash’s chest and back. The vampire that had been whipping him walked to a table and set the

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whip down. As the vampire piddled around at the table, the female from before walked over to Ash. Ash knew what she wanted. She wanted his blood. She had already bitten him once; there was still a stream of blood running from the corner of her mouth. The vampire torturer walked back over and stood beside the female. He now sported a set of brass knuckles on either hand. Ash looked up at the woman. She nodded to the vampire beside her. He walked over and planted one set of brass knuckles in Ash gut. He did not cry out, but merely growled in the back of his throat.

“You know, it’d hurt less if you’d just scream out loud for a change.” the female taunted.

“But, that would please you, wouldn’t it?” Ash said indignantly.

“Too true,” the female looked Ash up and down, “I’m surprised at you. Granted, I don’t know much about you. But, most men I’ve had tortured this way give in halfway through the whipping.”

Ash gave her a small, mocking smile before his torturer hit him in the side of the head. Ash grunted then looked the vampire in the eye. The vampire flashed him an evil grin, revealing the two large fangs characteristic of his kind. Ash returned the grin with a mocking one that revealed all of his rather sharp teeth. The vampire swung again, this time clubbing Ash on the back of his head. His torturer continued to walk around him as the female spoke again.

“Having fun, yet?” she paused, “There’s no need answer.”

“Why are you doing this to me?” Ash asked slowly.

“Why? You ask, why? I ask, why not? This is fun for me. Kellen likes this sort of thing too, but he had other business to attend to. Don’t worry about that though. Where was I? Oh, yeah. Why? Well, we could have just killed you, but you seem like such a strong creature, I just have to try and turn you.”

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The woman nodded. Ash's torturer moved in with two other vampires and began beating him mercilessly. They punched him and kicked him. Blood collected in Ash's mouth. The vampire woman chuckled a little. Ash glared at her and spat the blood at her. The blood splattered across the right side of her face, some got in her hair. She merely smiled. With her left hand, she wiped the blood from her face and licked it from her fingers. She moved closer and placed one hand on Ash's bleeding chest and seized the fur on the back of his head with the other. The woman pulled Ash's head to the right and sank her elongated fangs into his throat. Ash gritted his teeth. He tried to struggle but found he had not the strength to fight.

The woman pulled away from Ash, more of his blood flowing from the corners of her mouth. She licked away the blood around her mouth and grinned sadistically at the bound fox. The woman continued to walk backwards until she was almost completely shrouded in darkness. The other vampires moved in and resumed beating Ash. To his credit, Ash did not cry out or try to fight back. He tried to calm his mind to speak with Un, but instead he heard a door open and close in the distance. There was the sound of boots falling on the wood floor. They stopped when the tall male vampire from earlier appeared beside the woman. Ash listened.

"Bianca?" the man said.

"What is it, Kellen?" the woman, Bianca, asked.

"There's a problem." Kellen glanced at Ash, "The woman says the infant's ill. She's afraid it might die."

"And you care? Kellen, I'm surprised at you. You were the one that always went for the young ones."

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“I never said I cared. But, we need the woman to pull this off and she’s threatening suicide if the child dies. She wants us to get her a doctor. She also wants to see her husband.”

he paused, “Bianca?”

“Why do you think he wears that ring in his left ear?”

“Does it really matter?”

“Is it representative of something, my dear creature?” Bianca said to Ash.

Ash looked up at her and scowled.

“I thought so,” she began walking forward, “Hand me that knife, would you Kellen?”

Kellen walked to the table and picked up the knife Bianca had indicated. Meeting Bianca in front of Ash, he handed her the knife. Bianca ran the tip of the knife through Ash’s fur as she walked around behind him. Kellen eyed Bianca carefully, wondering what she was up to. She stopped behind Ash and whispered into his left ear while she moved the ring with the blade of the knife.

“I bet you have a girlfriend with a matching ring. If I see her on the other side, I’ll give her this...”

Bianca grabbed Ash’s ear with her left hand and sliced it off with the knife. She tossed the ear over his shoulder so it landed where Ash could see it. For the first time, Ash cried out in pain and anguish. The loss of the ear did not bother him. It was the ring in the ear. Calleigh wore one exactly like it in her right ear. That ring was the only thing he had of Calleigh. A tiny piece of her soul was locked inside it. Ash fought harder at the chains around his wrist and ankles. Bianca grabbed him under his chin from behind and sank her fangs into his throat for the third time. Ash’s screams died down as he became weaker with each passing moment. He knew enough about vampires to know that what being bitten three times means. Ash was going to

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become one of them. That thought, combined with the loss of his earring, made Ash cry harder than he ever had.

“There, there. That wasn’t so bad, now was it?” Bianca asked walking back around to face Ash, “A few little pricks and you’re on your way to a full and endless existence. Doesn’t that sound nice? Throw back with the brothers. Let them see we mean business.”

“As you wish, Bianca.” Kellen responded as he moved to Ash.

* * *

PAUL Archer stood in front of his daughter. Cassie stood her ground and looked directly into her father’s stern, but loving eyes.

“Cass, what have we talked about?” Paul said.

“I didn’t mean to, daddy,” Cassie started, “I wasn’t really thinking. I just saw the plastic cup as a little figurine of Micah.”

“You have to be more careful! Cassie, what if Micah had woken up and saw what you did? How would it make him feel that you kept this from him? What if he had left you because of it?”

“I’m sorry, dad. Are you mad at me?”

“No, I’m not mad,” Paul said taking his daughter into his arms, “I just couldn’t stand to see my little kitten’s heart broken over something like this.”

“I love you, daddy.”

“I love you, too, Cass.”

Just then, a doctor and two nurses came hurtling around the corner. They took off down the hall. Paul looked down at Cassie, puzzled. Cassie returned his glance then looked back at

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the doctor running away from them. The doctor stopped at a room down the hall and pushed his way in. The nurses followed. While the door was opened, Cassie could make out an erratic mass of beeping sounds coming from the room. Cassie counted the doors until she got to the one the doctor had entered. They had gone in the sixth door down from where her and her father stood. Her ears pricked up when she realized what that meant.

“Micah!” she gasped.

Cassie took off down the hall and flew into Micah’s room. The room was filled with the raised voices of doctors and nurses and the harsh sirens showing something was wrong. The gorilla doctor who had originally admitted Micah stood over him. He was pounding on Micah’s chest with his massive ape fists. He would stop every now and then and listen with his stethoscope. It went on like this for half an hour. The wailing from the machines around Micah never stopped and never changed. The doctor kept pounding despite pleas from the nurses for him to stop.

“Doctor! He’s gone. You did all you could.” one nurse said.

“No! He can’t be!” Cassie screamed.

The doctor and the nurses turned, seeing her for the first time. Paul walked to his daughter and put his paws on her quivering shoulders. The doctor looked into Cassie’s hurt, tear-filled eyes. She caught his gaze and held it. The doctor looked away and slammed his fists down on the metal railing on the bed.

“Damn!” the doctor turned to the nurses, “Give us a minute.”

The nurses nodded and left the room. The doctor slumped into an empty chair and held his head in his hands. Cassie walked around to the other side of the bed. She looked down at Micah’s face. Cassie reached over and stroked the fur on his cheek. She placed one paw on the

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center of his chest, right over his heart. She felt something strange. Cassie looked over at her father and nodded discretely towards the doctor. Paul nodded in understanding. He walked over to the doctor and asked if they could step outside. The doctor rose and walked out into the hall with Paul. Cassie watched them leave then climbed up onto the bed.

Cassie straddled Micah. She looked down at his expressionless face. Cassie held her arms up in front of her face. Her two silver bracelets glistened in the ambient light from the lamp in the corner. Cassie placed her arms together causing the bracelets to connect. A bright purple light surrounded the bracelets then enveloped her paws. Cassie quickly placed her open paws on Micah's chest and closed her eyes. The energy flowed from her paws and into Micah's body. The machine that had said that Micah was dead was now showing his heart rate was once again normal. Cassie smiled as she felt Micah's heart beating and his lungs expanding and contracting. She lost her balance and tumbled off the bed. Cassie lay on the floor unconscious from the exertion.

* * *

ASH lay flat on his back in the cramped room where Dan and Sean were chained to the wall.

Ash stared at the ceiling through tear-filled eyes. Dan and Sean talked to Ash as he lay there.

“Did you happen to learn anything?” Sean asked.

“Bianca...” Ash choked out.

“That woman?” Sean asked.

“Wait, I know that name.” Dan said.

“You do?” his brother asked skeptically.

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“Yeah, I read it somewhere. Supposedly, she’s the queen of all the vampires.” Dan reported.

“Well, that’s freakin’ perfect! Ash, how many times did she bite you?”

Before Ash could answer, four of the ceiling slats were moved so that the light from the full moon poured into the room. For a while, he just lay there bathed in the white light of the moon. Then Ash felt something. A burning sensation in his neck. His neck burned right around the holes created by Bianca’s fangs. Dan and Sean exchanged worried glances. Ash let out a strangled growl. He arched his back out of pain. Ash opened his mouth wide to scream, but the only sound that came was a gargling noise in the back of his throat. The brothers’ eyes widened as they watched all of Ash’s teeth grow longer. Four of Ash’s teeth grew longer than the rest. Dan and Sean exchanged worried glances. The door opened. Bianca and Kellen walked into the room.

“He’s changing?” Kellen asked, “Whose blood did he drink?”

“No one’s.” Bianca said.

“That’s impossible!” Sean said.

“You say.” Bianca retorted, “The light from the full moon is speeding the process. Do you know why?”

“Are we supposed to?” Dan asked.

“Probably not. It’s a vampire thing. Anyway, on this day 531 years ago Vlad Dracul became Dracula, the progenitor of our species. We vampires call this the Sânge Luna. It means, “Blood Moon” in Romanian.” Bianca paused and chuckled to herself, “Anyone bitten three times then placed in the light of the Blood Moon will become a vampire without having to be forced to

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drink another's blood. It makes things so much easier. Too bad it only happens every hundred years. C'mon, little puppy, show us what you're made of."

Bianca touched Ash's forehead. He began to thrash about on the floor. Ash rolled over on his side and faced Dan and Sean for the first time. They saw the bloody remnants of Ash's left ear. Kellen walked over and kicked Ash over onto his stomach. Ash struggled to his knees. He stretched one arm out to steady himself. He wrapped his other arm around his stomach. A deep, roiling growl issued from Ash's clamped jaws. The growl was one of pain and agony that slowly became one of wrath and anger. Ash leaned back and opened his eyes. They were the pale blue color characteristic of vampires. Ash rose and looked to Bianca then towards Dan and Sean still chained to the wall.

Ash smiled sadistically at them, revealing his newly grown vampire fangs. Dan and Sean glanced worriedly at each other. Ash began to walk towards them. He opened his mouth a little and emitted a low hissing sound. Half way there, his knees buckled and he fell to the floor. Once again, Ash gritted his teeth and shut his eyes in pain. Ash grunted then sat up and threw his head back. His mouth and eyes flew open. Eerie beams of purple light shot from his eyes and mouth. Dan and Sean looked around Ash to see if there were any mystical symbols or talismans nearby that could be the source of his pain. Sean's eyes set upon Ash's right paw. There was a symbol burned into the padding he had not noticed before.

"Danmy, look!"

The mark on Ash's paw began to glow purple. The purple glow transitioned into a wave of bright blue energy spreading over Ash's body. The light coming from Ash's eyes and mouth subsided. The wave of blue energy dissipated as well and Ash slumped forward. Dan, Sean and the two vampires all exchanged confused glances. A low moan escaped from Ash's muzzle. He

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placed his paws flat on the ground under him and started to lift himself off the ground. His tail gave one good swish before it was hidden beneath a bright blue haze. The glow vanished as quickly as it had appeared. Ash's tails flicked again. This time it split into nine, swishing tails. Ash sat up and opened his eyes. There was a faint glow illuminating his blue eyes.

Ash rose to his hindpaws and turned to face Bianca and Kellen. He took a deep breath and released it. When he did, the numerous wounds, he had been given by the vampires, closed up and healed completely. Even Ash's left ear had returned. Dan and Sean watched from behind as wisps of a luminous mist, three from each shoulder blade, extended from Ash's back. The strands of mist solidified into bones stretching away from Ash's shoulders. A halo of blue light formed where the bones emerged from Ash. The halos began to pulse along the bones, leaving red muscles behind. In similar fashion, skin and feathers formed on the two large wings Ash now had. Ash stretched the wings out as far as he could then brought them close to his body. Bianca and Kellen began to slowly back away.

Ash raised his paws and held them parallel, palms facing each other. Blue lightning began to spark from one paw to the other. One thick bolt of blue lightning shot up from the ground, passing between Ash's open paws. Swiftly, Ash wrapped his paws around the bolt of lightning. The lightning instantly became a long sword. The steel blade of the sword gave off a faint blue glow. Ash locked eyes with Bianca and held her gaze. She opened her mouth, showing her fangs, and let out a long, low hiss.

"What are you?" she screamed.

"You fucked with the wrong fur!" Ash growled.

Ash took one step closer to the two vampires. Dan watched the glowing blade carefully as Ash lowered the sword. Sean's eyes cast about trying to follow each of Ash's swishing tails

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at once. Kellen gave a blood-curdling hiss and launched himself at Ash. Ash pivoted and brought the blade of his sword up through Kellen's abdomen. The two halves of the vampire burned away leaving only dust to fall to the ground. Ash straightened up and pointed the tip of the sword at Bianca's face. Ash's wings folded out in a menacing spread behind him. Bianca took another step back from Ash. He glared down the blade at her.

"I want my earring back, bitch!"

He said the last word with force. Bianca fled out the door. Ash heard her lock the door from the outside. Ash lowered his sword and raised his left paw, palm out. The outstretched paw began to glow bright blue. Ash's paw began to tremble just enough that Dan and Sean could tell from their vantage point. Just when it seemed like the trembling would cause Ash's paw to fall off, Ash clenched his fist. The blue energy surrounding the paw vanished the instant his paw was closed. The door to their prison cell exploded in a shower of tiny splinters. Ash went to step through the door, but stepped back instead. A vampire jumped in through the open doorway and landed just short of Ash.

Ash swung his sword and severed the vampire's head. The headless body crumpled to the ground, bursting into flames as it fell. Ash stepped through the burning skeleton and leapt out into the main part of the barn. As soon as he was in the barn, Ash had to dodge a mace being swung by yet another vampire. Looking at the vampire, Ash quickly extended his right wing, knocking the vampire on his back. The mace flew out of his hand and landed on his head killing him. A group of six vampires was rushing towards him. Ash readied his sword and flew at the group. He swung the sword in a wide arc stretching from left to right. The vampires exploded in six bright balls of flame. Ash landed on the ground near another locked door like the one he had splintered.

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He heard a soft, calming voice behind the door. Ash took the padlock in his left paw and disintegrated it. The door swung away. Inside the room there was a human female cradling a baby. The woman looked up at Ash and started quivering. Ash stepped into the room. He folded his wings as close in as he could. He knelt down in front of the woman and looked in her light blue eyes.

“I’m not here to hurt you. I’m a friend.”

“Please, my son is very sick! He needs a doctor!” the woman pleaded.

Ash looked down at the child in her arms. He laid his sword on the ground and held his right paw over the sick infant. The symbol on his paw began to glow, casting a cool, blue light on the baby’s face. When the light vanished and Ash removed his paw, the baby began to cry. A sign of a healthy infant. Ash looked up and smiled at the woman. She stared back at the fox in wonder. She reached up with her right hand to stroke the fur on his face, but the chains on her wrists restricted her movement. Ash leaned closer so she could touch him. As the grateful woman, ran her fingers through the fur on Ash’s face, he reached up and closed his paw around the manacle on her wrist. There was a flash and the cuff fell from her wrist.

“There’re still some vampires hanging around. Wait here while I go take care of it.”

“Thank you.”

The woman nodded in agreement. Ash rose and exited the room, pulling the door closed behind him. Suddenly, all of the lights in the barn went out, plunging the barn into total darkness. Ash walked to the center of the barn and looked into the darkness. He shrugged and jammed the blade of his sword into the ground. Ash raised his arms and put his palms together. There was a small discharge of blue energy when his paws touched. Spreading his arms wide sent a wave of energy that illuminated the entire barn. The wave revealed the twenty vampires

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that remained and all of them were standing between Ash and Bianca. Ash narrowed his eyes and glared passed the vampires straight into Bianca's ice blue eyes.

With one good flap of his wings, Ash rocketed towards the crowding vampires. Many of the vampires leapt at Ash trying to hinder his progress. Ash either blasted them or impaled them on his sword. Either way, the number of vampires in his way dwindled from twenty to five. These five, however, wielded swords of their own. They rushed him as one, and Ash killed them as one. The vampires lunged forward at the same time stabbing out towards Ash. Ash flipped over their heads and swung his sword around and severed five heads from five undead bodies. Ash straightened and looked right into Bianca's frightened eyes. Ash's eyes flicked to Bianca's closed right hand then back to her face.

“Give me that earring. Now.”

Bianca took a step back and threw the ring up into the air. Ash flew up to grab it. The vampire queen turned and ran towards the barn door. Ash reached up and closed his left paw around the ring. He swung around and hurled the sword down towards Bianca. The sword penetrated her body. Bianca stopped and looked down at the steel blade jutting from between her breasts. Bianca turned slowly and looked at Ash as he settled back to the ground. With one sharp claw, Ash punctured his left ear and replaced the earring in its rightful place. Ash moved closer to Bianca. Walking around her, Ash wrapped one paw around the hilt of his sword. He pushed the sword in up to the hilt.

“I could have lived without an ear. I could have lived with being a vampire. But, you should never have taken this earring.”

Ash gave the sword one good twist. Bianca's body burst into flames and fell from around the blade. Ash's sword disappeared in a flash of blue lightning. Crossing to the fuse

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box, Ash turned the lights of barn back on. The woman came walking out into the open. Clutching her baby close to her, she walked over to Ash. He gave her a warm smile. Ash patted her on the shoulder then went to free Dan and Sean from their own shackles. When they returned to the main part of the barn, Dan broke off and went to a table in the far corner. The door to the barn opened and a man stepped in. It was Jesse, the man that had set them up. Clashed in his hand there was a silver plated revolver.

Jesse looked around the barn before setting his eyes on Ash. The clicking sound of the hammer being pulled back echoed through the empty barn. Ash turned to fully face the man. He raised the gun but did not fire. Jesse hesitated because the woman Ash had saved stepped between the two of them. Jesse did not lower the gun, but nor did he make any move to fire at his target. Dan walked back over, but stopped short when he noticed the standoff. Dan and Sean exchanged confused looks about what to do. All of them stood rooted in place until the woman finally broke the silence.

“Jesse, no! This creature saved my life. And, the life of our son. I won’t let you hurt him.”

“That thing saved you?” Jesse asked perplexed.

“Yes. We owe him everything,” the woman said, “Put the gun down, sweetie.”

Jesse let his arm drop to his side. The woman smiled at him and walked over and kissed him on the cheek. Ash let out a sigh of relief. With the sigh, his wings and other eight tails vanished in a haze of blue energy. Jesse blinked in awe for a moment or two then turned his attention on his infant son. He began speaking quietly with his wife. Dan walked over to Ash and handed him his shirt and jacket. Ash had just pulled the shirt over his head when he noticed that the woman was staring at him. Ash glanced from Dan to Sean and back to the woman.

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“What?” Ash said.

“You never did tell me your name,” the woman asked.

“Oh, sorry. It’s Ash.”

“Ash,” she turned to her husband, “What do you think?”

“I think it’s perfect, Lilia.” Jesse said.

Ash’s jaw dropped. “What did you call her?”

“Lilia.” Jesse repeated.

“That’s my name. Lilia Reynolds. Why? Is something wrong?”

Ash shook his head in the negative and excused himself from the barn. Ash walked outside and put his jacket on. Dan came out of the barn and followed him until he stopped halfway to the car. Dan walked around and stood in front of him. He held out a small metal case, which Ash took and opened. It contained Ash’s rings, bracelets and his pendant. Ash removed the pendant from the box and slipped the cord around his head. He closed the box and stuffed it into his jacket pocket. Ash straightened and looked Dan dead in the eye.

“What was that back there?” Dan asked.

“Just got a little unnerved.”

“Why?”

“Because they named their baby after me.”

“You should be proud.”

“Oh, I am. It’s just...ugh! My full name is Ash Reynolds. My parents are Jesse and Lilia Reynolds.”

“Whoa!”

“Yeah.”

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“Now, what’s with that earring?”

“You ask too many questions, y’know that?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“It’s special. Let’s just leave it at that.

“Hey, guys!” Sean said walking their way, “Time to go.”

END PART 2