

# FALLING ASH

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## **PART 3**

CASSIE lay with her eyes closed. She was awake, but she only wanted to listen. She could hear the sound of the heart monitor. However, it seemed to Cassie that the beeping was louder than she remembered. Before she could worry about it any longer, Cassie became aware of someone else standing in the room. Her fur rippled with apprehension when she got the feeling that whoever was also in the room was looking at her. Then she heard a voice. *No!* She heard *two* voices. Two voices speaking the same words simultaneously.

“How are we today, my young fox? Hmph. Still unconscious, I see. Well, you almost died yesterday. That would have been very bad for your brother. You see; he is irreversibly linked to you. It’s quite interesting, really. Whatever harm is inflicted on you, Ash feels. It’s strange that it does not seem to work the other way. Oh, forgive me, where was I? Oh, yes! You did die. You were dead for five minutes and fifteen seconds, I believe.”

The voice paused. There came the sound of heavy boots falling on the tiled floor of the hospital room. They grew louder and stopped.

“And, we have this young kitten to thank for that, don’t we Micah? She’s quite beautiful, I must say. You have good taste. I admire that.”

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A large paw reached out and stroke Cassie's hair. She shivered involuntarily. There was a low reverberating chuckle.

"You don't remember me, do you? Oh, well. How sweet you must taste, my dear. Do you know what she taste's like, Micah? No? I didn't think so. Well, let's find out."

Cassie did not need to open her eyes to know what was coming next. Whoever was standing next to her bed was leaning over to sink their jaws into her throat. Cassie reacted. Her eyes shot open. She turned her head and looked up at the fur standing over her. He seemed to be a hybrid of a bear and a fox. He had two large wings, like the wings of a bat. The hybrid fur glared down at her with burning red eyes. A thud came from behind the fur. He turned at looked down. Micah had woken up and fallen out of his bed. His outstretched paw began to glow with a yellow light, but the glow faded when he lost consciousness again. The winged fur rounded on Cassie, wrapping one massive paw around her throat.

"Scream!" he growled.

Just as Cassie screamed, the fur vanished from sight. The door to the room flew open. Cassie's father ran in, followed closely by Jesse, Lilia, Calleigh and Cole and the doctor. The group froze when they saw Micah lying motionless on the floor. Paul stooped and lifted the young fox in his arms and set him back onto the bed. The doctor reattached the leads for the heart monitor. After checking to make sure everything was working properly, the doctor excused himself. Cassie was now sitting upright looking from one face to another. There were tears in her eyes. Paul sat down on the edge of the bed and put his arms around his trembling daughter. Lilia walked around the other side of the bed and placed her paw on Cassie's shoulder.

"Thank you. You saved my son's life." Lilia spoke softly.

"What was Micah doing on the floor in the first place?" Cole asked sniffing the air.

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“He woke up and crawled out of the bed.” Cassie choked.

“Why?” Paul asked softly.

“He was trying to save me. There was another fur in here with us.” Cassie began to sob.

“He was going to kill me.”

Cole immediately drew a long knife from somewhere inside his jacket. He started looking around the room for any signs that another fur was hiding. His did not find any fur hiding behind any of the furniture. Cole stooped low to the floor and ran two fingers across the linoleum. Rising, he walked over to Jesse and held his paws so the fox could see what he had found. Jesse looked at Cole meaningfully.

“Sulfur.” Cole said just loud enough for everyfur to hear.

“Sulfur?” Paul echoed.

Jesse exchanged knowing glances with both Cole and Calleigh. Turning to face Paul and Cassie, Jesse let out a heavy sigh.

“Sulfur is left behind in trace amounts when a demonic creature has been in the room.”

Jesse paused. “I hunt demons. So does Ash, Calleigh and Cole.”

“And, Zach and Jake and Victor.” Calleigh threw in.

“You’re all demon hunters?” Paul asked for clarity.

“Yes. I understand how this sounds. I probably sound crazy for even suggesting the possibility of the existence of demons and other creatures of the supernatural persuasion.”

“No, you don’t.” Cassie spoke up.

Cassie looked up at her father. He met her eyes and gave a slight nod of his feline head. Cassie reached over and picked up a pair of silver bracelets sitting by the bed. She put them on. Paul took a dying rose from the vase and set it before his daughter. Cupping her paws over the

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rose, Cassie closed her eyes and took a deep breath. First the bracelets began to glow purple then her paws. Purple light shone from her palms down onto the rose. When the light faded and Cassie moved her paws, the black and wilted petals of the rose were once again bright red and full of life. Cassie lifted the rose and held it for all to see. Handing the rose to her father, Cassie looked over at Micah.

“I saved Micah’s life.”

“We know.” Calleigh said.

“No, I mean before now. Yesterday, Micah died.”

“But, the doctor said...” Lilia began.

“I asked the doctor to hide what happened from you. I didn’t know how you’d take it.”

Paul offered.

“Anyway, Micah died and I brought him back to life.”

“You brought him back to life?” Cole asked.

“Like the rose?” Calleigh asked flattening out her ears.

“Yeah, only I had to use too much energy and I passed out.”

“Now that all that is cleared up,” Jesse started, “What can you tell us about the fur that was in here?”

“He was large. He looked kinda like a cross between a bear and a fox. Grey-brown fur. He had two large wings and eight tails, I think. I’m not sure. They were moving around a lot. He had red eyes and when he spoke, it sounded like two voices speaking at once.”

Jesse stood thinking for a moment. Calleigh and Cole exchanged confused looks. No fur spoke for a while. Paul was rubbing his daughter’s back when Jesse spoke up.

“Did the fur say anything?”

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“He talked about Ash. Said that Ash and Micah were connected. He told Micah that whatever happens to him, happens to Ash. Somehow, he knew that I had saved Micah yesterday. He was going to...”

Cassie shuddered as she thought back to when the fur had tried to sink his jaws into her throat. Cassie could not shake the feeling that she should know who the fur was, or had once been. The door to the room flew open and banged against the wall. Jake O’Connell walked in and stopped. He wore strange clothes made from black leather. He looked quizzically at Cassie in her hospital bed. Jesse turned to Jake and waited. Jake kept staring.

“Jake!” Jesse snapped.

“What?” the leopard jumped.

Jesse raised his eyebrows. Understanding dawned on the felines faces.

“Oh! We have a problem. A big problem.”

“How big is ‘big’?” Cole asked.

“Big.” the feline said forcefully.

“We’re screwed.” Cole said.

\* \* \*

*ASH* sat behind the steering wheel of the brothers’ car. He had been driving for the past few hours. Dan was sitting in the passenger seat with his computer in his lap. Sean was stretched out on the back seat resting his eyes. There was no sound except for the clicking noise of Dan’s typing. The silence became unbearable. Ash reached over and turned on the radio. He noticed Dan glanced at his paw worriedly.

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“What?” Ash asked as he searched through the stations.

“Nothin’,” Dan began, “It’s just that Sean doesn’t let anyone else touch his radio.”

Ash just smiled and kept searching for a good station. He had started to wonder if this world had some of the same bands as his own. He stopped on a station and waited for a moment, or two. Ash smiled again when he realized what the song was. *It’s fitting*, Ash thought to himself as he listened.

*Fools said I, you do not know  
Silence like a cancer grows.  
Hear my words that I might teach you,  
Take my arms that I might reach you.  
But my words like silent raindrops fell,  
And echoed  
In the wells of silence*

Ash’s right ear began to twitch to the slow beat of the song. Simon and Garfunkel. Ash began to wonder what they looked like here. The Simon of his world was a cat that looked like he had been slammed face-first into a brick wall. Conversely, Garfunkel was a tall, well-built German Shepard with eyes that still made his mother go weak at the knees when she saw them. He laughed at the thought of one of the greatest rock and roll duos as a pair of furless humans. His chuckle drew attention for the brothers.

“What’s so funny?” Dan asked.

“Nothin’.” Ash responded quickly.

“Oh, hey! Almost forgot,” Sean said sitting up, “I found this in that barn. I think it was Bianca’s journal before you dusted her, Ash.”

Dan took the small book from his brother’s hand and began flipping threw it. Sean hung his head over the back of the front seat. He watched over his brother’s shoulder as Dan perused

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the contents of the journal. Ash glanced over occasionally, careful not to take his eyes off the road for too long. Dan began to mumble to himself as he read through one of the entries. Sean sat back and waited. Ash finally cleared his throat. Dan looked up from the page he was on and looked over at Ash. The fox gave him a *well-what's-so-interesting* look. Dan opened to another page and began reading.

“I was visited again today by Him. He said that all was about ready for our journey to his world. Until I met Him, I would not have thought a world like the one he describes existed. He has promised that my vampires and I would have new and wondrous creatures to feast upon in this other dimension.” Dan paused to clear his throat. “He told me that He would be able to make us so we would not have to hide during the day.”

“It just keeps gettin’ better and better, doesn’t it?” Sean asked sarcastically.

“Oh, it gets worse. Let me finish. ‘He told me of the creatures living in his world. They are animals with human characteristics. He himself appears as a cross between a bear and a dog. He even suggested that we may have a chance to taste one of these creatures before we arrived in his world.’ She goes on from there talking about how badly she wants to bite someone from this other world.”

“And, she did. Three times.” Ash said.

“Yeah. There’s a doodling on the back page, Danny. I thought it looked oddly familiar, but I couldn’t place it.” Sean said from the back seat.

Dan opened the journal once more and flipped to the back page. He started turning the book left and right trying to identify the symbol. When that failed, Dan just described the symbol to Ash and Sean. Dan hoped one of them would know what it meant.

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“Okay. So, the symbol looks like a solid black circle with a design chopped out of it. If I’m looking at this right, there’s a triangle cut out of the circle. There’s an arrow going out from the midpoint of each side of the triangle. And some sort weird flower design is inscribed inside the triangle. Ring any bells?”

Ash thought for a second. He looked towards his paws gripped on the steering wheel. Turning his right paw so he could see the palm, Ash studied the mark on his palm. He sighed and held his paw so Dan and Sean could see the mark burned into his palm. Dan studied the mark. He and Sean looked from the drawing to Ash’s palm.

“They’re the same.” Sean breathed.

“Actually, Sean, I think that the one on Ash’s palm is like the reverse of this one. I think. I’m not sure.” Dan scrunched up his face with confusion.

“They are. If they were placed inside one another, you’d have nothing more than a solid black circle,” Ash said glancing at his palm before returning his paw to the wheel. “The symbol in that book belongs to a demon. This mark belongs to his angel brother.”

“Whoa! An angel. That’s heavy.” Sean muttered.

“Yeah,” Ash said, “So, Dan. You ever find anything else on the demon that sent me here?”

“Yeah. Hold on.”

Dan opened his computer again and punched a few keys. He waited the spoke.

“Okay, here we go. I e-mailed a few friends to see if they could find anything I couldn’t.”

“And?” Sean interrupted.

“One of them did find a way to kill the monster, but it won’t be easy.”



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“How do you mean?” Ash asked worriedly.

“Well, the only way to kill the thing is to know its name. You know its name and you can do whatever you want with it, or to it.”

“So, what’s the problem?” Sean was still baffled by what the complication was.

“The only way to learn its name is to have him tell you.” Dan finished looking away from the computer monitor.

“Well, shit! How am I supposed to get it to tell me the damn thing’s name?” Ash barked.

“Trick it.” Dan said quickly.

Ash growled in disgust. He was beginning to wonder if it was really going to be possible to defeat the monster even if he did get home. *When! Not ‘if’, when!* Ash thought. Sean looked out the windshield and extended his arm over the back of the chair. Pointing with his finger, he indicated the next turn-off to Ash. Ash moved the car over one lane then turned off the off-ramp. He made a left turn at the top of the ramp and drove across the overpass. They drove in silence for the next fifteen miles until Dan told Ash to turn right. Ash obeyed and turned down the indicated dirt road. The dirt road led right to the front door of a modest two-story house with a neighboring barn.

Two men walked out onto the porch, each of them holding a rifle in their hands. Ash saw a woman standing in the window. Ash’s ears flopped to either side when he noticed she had a shotgun trained on the car. Ash looked over to Dan then in the back at Sean. Sean shrugged and stepped out of the car. Dan got out as well, but motioned for Ash to wait. Ash looked out the windshield. Dan and Sean walked to the porch and stopped. The men smiled at the brothers and let the rifles hang by their sides. The younger man looked towards the car and pointed at Ash.

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Sean turned, his mouth as he explained why they had come. Dan waved for Ash to get out of the car and join them.

Ash sighed. Slowly, he opened the door and got out of the car. Ash turned from the car and walked towards the house. The woman from the window walked out onto the porch and stared. Ash was surprised when he noticed that these three humans did not shrink away in fear. *In fact, Ash thought, they look as if they've seen something like me before!* Just as the thought popped in his head, the older man said something to the younger. This one turned and walked back into the house, taking the three guns with him. Ash's ears swiveled forward in anticipation. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Ash froze in his tracks. His paws curled into fists as he readied himself for whatever attack might come.

“Ash, what are you doing?” Sean asked.

The door to the house opened again. The younger man stepped out onto the porch. This time he brought another with him. Ash's eyes widened when he saw the face of the newcomer to their little party. A lion! The lion looked at Ash and smiled.

“You?!” Ash exclaimed.

“Hello, Ash. How you holdin' up?” Todd Hunter asked.

\* \* \*

*JAKE* led the group to where his father and Zach were already lying in wait. Jesse, Cole and Calleigh had each changed into their uniforms. There were two other furs sitting with Victor and Zach. Calleigh looked at her twin. Cole returned her look and shrugged. The two furs were both raccoons. One was slightly taller than the other, but the shorter one was more muscular

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than his companion. Calleigh looked to Jake, but he seemed just as confused as she was. Jesse walked over to the two raccoons and shook paws with both of them.

“Dan. Sean. It’s been awhile.” Jesse said looking from the taller raccoon to the shorter.

“Jesse. We heard about your sons and we wanted to help.” the tall one, Dan, said.

“Yeah,” the shorter, Sean, began. “We’re at your service, Jesse. Use how ever you want, just don’t get us killed.”

“Funny as ever, Sean.” Jesse said, smiling for the first time since Ash disappeared.

“Dad?” Jake interrupted.

“Yes?” Victor said setting his one good eye on his son.

“Who are these guys?” Jake said jerking his thumb in the direction of the two raccoons.

“These are the Browning brothers. Sean and Dan,” Victor said, “They’re great hunters.”

“Oh! Okay, just checkin’.” Jake looked towards Cole and flashed him a wry grin.

Cole returned the grin then quickly turned away when he noticed Calleigh studying him and Jake. Calleigh looked over to Jake and saw only the back of his head. She decided not to press either of them now. Jesse and Victor were standing close to Dan and Sean, going over the plan for the assault. The group was hiding in a patch of trees a hundred meters from a cave. Sean had told them that the monster that had taken Ash was inside. Dan continued their briefing and informed them that another, as of yet unidentified, fur had arrived before any of the others and gone in the cave.

Cole raised his head and began sniffing the air. He smelled something odd wafting through the air from the cave. He could not figure out what it was. He took another deep sniff of the air. Cole became choked and began to cough uncontrollably. Calleigh and Jake both ran

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and grabbed Cole before he fell. He continued coughing as the two lowered him slowly to the ground. When the coughing started to come less and less, Cole spoke one word.

“Sulfur.”

Before anyfur could respond, a large column of smoke erupted from the mouth of the cave and shot towards the sky. From the head of the column, two large dragon-like wings extended on either side. The pair of wings continued skyward until the sun was behind it. The wings cast a fearsome shadow that fell right over where Jesse and his friends lay hidden. A bright flash came from the sky. The rocks and trees they had been hiding behind incinerated as a wave of red energy tore through them. Jesse and the rest of his party were sent sprawling through the air. As they struggled to their feet, a deep, roiling growl came from the mouth of the cave.

Calleigh sat up and looked towards the cave. The concussive blast from the sky had also widened the cave mouth. Cole rose to his paws and knees and looked at his sister. When he saw her eyes widen in fear, Cole turned around and face the cave. A pair of large clawed hands was clawing into the ground. The thing about the hands that scared Calleigh was not their size, but the fact that they were both right hands. A pair of left hands came out next and together the four hands tore the hill above the cave to pieces. The monster the hands belonged to rose to its full height. The creature towered over the gathered and startled furs. It must have been twenty feet tall, not including the three long horns growing the top of its head.

It emitted another rumbling growl then looked down and spotted the gather furs. As Calleigh stood frozen by its stare, a glowing arrow flashed past her ear and lodged in the creature’s eye. Calleigh turned and saw Jake string another arrow. As he pulled it back, a burst of lavender energy leapt from his power ring to the arrowhead. Jake released the arrow and there

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was another wail of pain from the monster. The ground shook as the monster lumbered towards them. Jake strung another arrow. Calleigh, Cole and the rest drew their weapons and prepared for battle.

“IMPUDENT LITTLE PESTS!” the monster’s voice boomed forth. “I WILL CRUSH YOU ALL!”

The monster stopped and launched a wave of black energy from its gaping jaws. The furs scattered except Jake. He stood frozen in place by fear. Cole rushed over and tackled his friend before the black wave hit where they had stood. The ground broke and flew in all directions, leaving a sizeable crater behind. Four enormous wings spread from the monster’s four shoulder blades. The wings flapped once and the creature was soaring into the sky. He flew up and joined the other winged creature from the cave. Together, they flew at a great speed away from where the cave had been shortly before.

“Thanks for that.” Jake said to Cole.

“Don’t mention it,” Cole said pulling Jake upright. “Where do you think they’re headed?”

Jake looked in the direction they had taken. His eyes flared in revelation. “Oh God! They’re headed for the city!”

\* \* \*

*ASH* walked along beside Todd Hunter, as they were lead away from the house.

“How did you get here?” Ash asked.

“I came here. Remember, Ash, I am a sorcerer.” Todd replied.

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“Here we are!” their guided called.

Ash had been introduced to the man who was supposed to be able to send him home. Victor O’Connell. He and his son, Jake, had become very accomplished hunters and sorcerers in their own right. Ash was not as surprised to hear the man’s name as to the fact that the man also had four scars running across his left eye. He wore a patch to hide the bulk of the disfigurement. Ash had expected the Jake of this world to be exactly like the one he knew, but that was not the case. The Jake he knew was not gay, as far as he knew. He did not care thought, one way or the other. If this boy and his father could get him home, Ash felt it was not any of his business how these humans lived out their lives.

Ash looked up at their destination. It was large barn set out away from the house. Ash stopped as he stared up at the barn. His ears flopped to the side and he let out a low groan. Todd stopped and looked back at the fox.

“Ash? What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I hate barns.” Ash mumbled.

“They don’t bother me.” Todd said gleefully as he entered the barn.

“Yeah, well you weren’t in the last one.” Ash grumbled as he followed the lion.

The lion laughed as they followed the O’Connell men into the center of the barn. On the table, there was an assortment of books, papers and weapons. Ash looked around at the floor. There were many symbols and circles drawn on the floor. Most of the circles had a charred place in the center of the intricate designs. Ash wondered what could have caused the black spots in the white circles. Ash pointed to one of the circles.

“What’s that?” he asked slowly.

“They’re the designs we use to open dimensional portals.” Victor answered.

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“And the charred places?” Ash pressed the man.

“That’s what’s left after a successful transportation.” Jake added opening a book on the table.

“That’s not very reassuring.” Ash said.

“Ash. This is how I got here, and I’m in one piece. There’s nothing to worry about. What could go wrong?” Todd said with a smile.

Ash stared at the back of Todd’s head as he walked to a spot on the floor where there were no circles or symbols drawn. Kneeling, Todd used a piece of white chalk to draw out a very complex circle. When he was finished, the circle was nearly a foot and half in diameter. There were strange symbols inscribe within the circle that Ash had never seen before. Ash watched as Todd placed an apple in the center of the circle and began to speak. Ash heard his words, but did not understand them. As he chanted, Todd held his paws out over the circle. Ash walked around to his left so he could get a better look.

Though Todd’s eyes were opened, they were distant. His mouth barely seemed to be moving, but he was indeed speaking. The lines of the circle began to glow with a cool, purple light. Ash took a step back as a small sphere of electricity formed above the circle at eye-level with the fox. The ball of lightning pulsed each time Todd finished the incantation and began again. Todd abruptly stopped speaking and slammed his paws onto the ground around the circle. A bolt blue-purple electricity sprung from each of the five symbols spread evenly along the edge of the circle. The five bolts struck the apple just as a sixth, large bolt descended from the energy ball.

The six bolts connected with the apple. The cool, purple glow of the circle flared and became bright red. There was a loud cracking sound. A puff of smoke rose from the center of

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the circle. Todd coughed as he accidentally breathed in some of the smoke. He covered his mouth with paw and waved away the smoke with the other. What Ash saw when the smoke had cleared did not make him feel any better about this plan. The apple was gone and in its place was small crack in the floor. The edges of the crack were blackened. Todd looked up at Ash and smiled. Ash returned his smile with a looking of bewilderment.

“Well, I think we’re ready to do the real thing.” Todd said rising.

“What do you mean?” Ash asked incredulously.

“C’mon.” Todd turned and walked out of the barn with Victor and Jake. “Because of the size of the circle we have to do this in a clearing in the woods behind the house.”

“Jake. Go get Dan and Sean. And, see if your mother wants to watch.” Victor said to his son.

“Wait! We’re actually gonna do this? What if it doesn’t work? How do you even know the apple got to where you sent it?” Ash practically yelled his questions at Todd and Victor.

Neither of them answered. They just continued on into the trees. Ash threw his hands up in frustration and followed reluctantly. When they arrived at the clearing Todd had mentioned, there was already a larger version of the circle drawn out on a flat, circular stone that seemed out of place in the forest. Todd instructed Ash to stand in the center of the circle. He told Ash to also change into his fighting gear. Ash nodded and clenched his fists. Victor watched with curiosity. Jake returned with Dan, Sean and his mother. The new spectators looked in wonder as blue energy flowed over Ash.

Two large wings and eight more tails formed as the glow around Ash brightened. When the energy vanished, Ash’s clothes had been transformed into a practical leather jerkin, pants and boots. Two bracers formed on his lower arms and an band of leather appeared on his right arm



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just below the shoulder. Pieces of boiled leather appeared and came together to form a guard over his left shoulder. Ash let his paws relax and nodded to the sorcerers that he was ready. Todd, Victor and Jake stood around the circular stone and began chanting the incantation. The circle began to glow. The five symbols spread along the edge were glowing with white-hot intensity.

One by one, a bolt of electricity leapt from the symbols and struck Ash on all sides. The pain caused Ash to throw his head back and look skyward. Dark clouds had formed overhead and bolts of lightning were raining down to form a concentrated sphere of pulsating blue-purple energy. As Ash watched, the three sorcerers stopped chanting and planted their palms on the stone just outside the circle. The circle began to glow bright red just as a large bolt lightning started streaking from the sky down towards Ash. The lightning bolt struck and Ash's pained screams were lost in the cacophony. There was a loud cracking sound as the stone was split asunder. As the smoke cleared, only one thing was for certain. Ash was no longer in this world of humans.

\* \* \*

*ASH* seemed to be soaring through darkness so complete that there was nothing. There were no lights. There were no sounds. There was almost nothing, but there was pain. Ash began hurt all over his body. He felt as if somefur, or something, was slowly eating away at him. His right arm seemed like the skin and muscles were being ripped from the bone. His left side felt like somefur was carving a big chunk from his body. He could not feel left paw at all. It was as if

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every nerve ending from his wrist down had been removed. Ash tried to scream in pain but he could not.

He was alone in complete blackness. And, no fur could save him now.

\* \* \*

*CALLEIGH* stood in the middle of Main Street with her brothers and their fellow warriors. Jake had flown to the top of a nearby building and was perched on a gargoyle with his bow drawn. He aimed arrow down at the monster and waited. The monster had arrived some time before they had. Many citizens had already lost their lives in the creature's initial assault. Those that had not been killed had gone into hiding. The creature glared down at the seven furs poised to attack him. Calleigh drew her sai and spun them around her middle fingers. Cole and the rest had drawn their own weapons and held them at the ready.

For a long time it seemed as if none of them was going to make a move. Zach decided not to wait any longer. Rushing towards the monster, Zach lowered his sword and dug the tip into the ground. The blade, now surrounded by pulsating energy, carved a smooth crevice through the black asphalt of the road. The monster lunged in to meet the charging wolf half way. Two enormous claws swiped down at Zach. Raising his oversized blade, he severed both claws before they could do any damage. The severed claws vanished in two puffs of inky black smoke and reappeared at the end of the creature's arms in a similar fashion. The monster raised all four of its curled fists and dropped them towards Zach.

"Oh...fuck!" Zach yelled as he ducked to one side.

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The four massive fists slammed into the road where Zach had been standing. Zach rose to his hindpaws and turned to face the monster. Black tendrils of energy were seeping from the creature's clenched jaws. There seemed to be an evil grin on the monster's face. The jaws opened and a ball of black energy flew towards Zach. Spinning his sword in a circle before him, Zach created a shield of palpitating blue-violet energy between him and the incoming attack. The blast collided with the shield, but the shield was not enough. The two opposing types of energy surged against one another. The reaction caused a massive explosion that sent Zach crashing through the façade of nearby shop.

Lavender energy sprung from Jake's power ring and enveloped the head of his arrow. Jake released the arrow he had been carefully aiming. When the arrow made contact with the creature's skin, there was a explosion of lavender energy and orange flames. Chunks of seared flesh flew from where the arrow had connected. Jake's smile of satisfaction vanished as he watched the large wound heal over. The monster raised its four massive arms into the air. Two columns of black mist erupted from the palm of each outstretched clawed hand. The columns curved downward and met the ground where they solidified into eight grotesque monsters. Jake loaded another arrow and incinerated one of the newly formed creatures.

The seven that remained were nearly nine feet in height. Their skin was the color of decaying flesh and was like leather. Their torsos were small and compact, as were their upper arms and legs. The rest of their arms and legs were as big around as Calleigh was at her hips. Their mouths appeared to have been permanently sewn shut. Two long spikes extended from the back of their round heads. Despite all of this, the most unsettling features of these monsters were their eyes. They were round and sickly yellow. An evil light shone from them making the

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overall effect much more sinister. The monstrous creatures began lumbering towards the waiting furs.

As Calleigh and the others prepared for the assault, a deep, rumbling laugh came from somewhere in the distance. Just before battle was met, a small winged shape flew up and away from one of the far buildings. Calleigh could not waste time trying to determine what it was as the first of the creatures was close enough to attack. The furs rushed forward to meet the rest of the beasts. Even though their blades cut deep into the creatures' skin, there were no visible wounds left once the blades had exited their bodies. These minions of the larger monster seemed to be indestructible. One creature swung its clawed fingers at Calleigh, but she ducked and the claw sliced across the back of one of his comrades. The wounds did not heal.

The others saw what had happened and began crowding the creatures into a tight bunch, hoping to increase the chances of them harming each other. Jake looked down from his perch in amusement then he became aware that the day seemed to be getting darker. Looking up, the young leopard saw as black, swirling clouds formed overhead. Bolts of lightning struck downwards at point below the clouds. The small bolts fused into a large sphere of roiling blue-purple electricity. On the street, a purple glowing circle appeared beneath the feet of the creatures as they pushed against one another. Calleigh and the others backed away slowly.

Strange voices seemed to drift towards their ears out of nowhere. Then came the sounds of three pairs of paws being slammed hard down onto stone. In the instant that sound came, the purple light of the circle became fiery red. Five bolts of white lightning erupted from five symbols situated on the edge of the circular design. The seven creatures in the circle were struck by the lightning bolts. The bodies began to burn away. A gargantuan bolt of blue-purple electricity streaked down from the sky. It struck the center of the circle. There was a resounding

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crack. The sound of glass shattering was also heard as the sonic boom from the lightning strike spread outward and hit the surrounding buildings. The furs gathered around the circle were thrown backwards by the shockwave. When the smoke and dust cleared, there was a crater where the circle had been and there was something moving in the bottom. Something clawing its way out.

\* \* \*

*ASH*'s eyes hurt, as the darkness had abruptly become light. He had tried to close his eyes, but he could only seem to be able to close his right eye. He felt as if he was falling. And, he was falling at an incredibly fast speed. Despite his inability to close one eye, Ash could not see anything around him. He could not tell where he was. All around him was bright blue-purple light. There was a constant electrical buzz in his left hear, but he heard nothing with his right. Faint noises began to drift towards him as he fell further down. Ash saw the glowing red circle rushing up at him. Just as he was about to hit it, the ground split with a crack. Junks of black asphalt flew up from the newly formed crater.

The next thing Ash knew, he was lying at the bottom of this crater. Looking up into the sky, he saw black clouds swirling around. Wisps of inky black mists swirled through the air around Ash. He lay at the bottom watching the mists as they disappeared forever. Hushed voices drifted to his one functional ear from outside the crater. They were too soft for him to place. Ash tried to roll over and push himself to his paws and knees. Pain shot through every inch of his body. His right arm felt like it would collapse underneath him. Despite the pain, Ash rose to his hindpaws and began to climb out of the crater.

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\* \* \*

*CALLEIGH* watched the crater carefully. The others gathered close to her and waited along with her to see who, or what, would come out. With a nod from Victor, Jake pulled and strung another arrow and aimed it down at the crater. They all watched, even the monster. A paw covered in brown fur reached out of the crater and clawed at the ground. When the other paw came out, the gathered furs took a step back and gasped. This paw, the left one, had no fur or muscles on it. It was nothing but white bone. When both paws seemed to have a firm hold, whomever they belonged to started pulling themselves out onto the road. The fur climbed out and rolled onto his back and lie completely still.

From the shoulder to the wrist on the right arm, there was nothing but bone, except around the elbow joint. There was a small collection of muscles holding the joint together. A massive chunk of flesh was missing from the furs left side. His ribcage was visible, as was his left lung. His right ear seemed to have been ripped or burned off from his head. The left side of his face was also missing. A good portion of his skull and jaw was visible. His left eye was just sitting inside its socket, staring unblinkingly at the sky. *Calleigh* continued to scan the fur until her eyes landed on his left ear. Or, rather on the ring in his left ear.

“Ash!” *Calleigh* screamed in joy.

The fur moved a little when *Calleigh* screamed. It was Ash. He had made it back to his world. But, at what cost? Had he arrived only to die from the wounds he had sustained while traveling between dimensions? *Calleigh* ran to Ash and knelt beside him. She slid her arm gently underneath his head and raised it off the pavement. Ash’s right eye opened and joined its

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counterpart in looking into Calleigh's eyes. She leaned in and kissed him full on the lips. Strength surged through Ash's crippled body. The others began to close in just as the monster leapt across the crater. The creature came down between the advancing furs and Calleigh and Ash.

With his new strength, Ash struggled up onto one knee. He placed his right paw palm down on the road. Blue energy started pulsing away from his paw. Pail tendrils of blue energy flowed up the bare bones of his right arm. Striving against the pain, Ash clenched his fist. The ill-defined aura of blue surged and became more distinct. His tail flashed and spread into nine. Two large sprouted from his back and stretched skyward. His once tattered battle tunics were once again whole. Ash rose, opening his fist as he did. His sword materialized out of the ground. He rose to his full height and glared at the back of the monster's large cranium. Ash took a step towards the monster.

"Get away, Calleigh." he said calmly, "Everyfur! Get back!"

Calleigh nodded and backed away. Ash clicked the tip of his sword on the ground to get the monster's attention. The behemoth turned and scowled down at Ash. Jesse and the others walked away and joined Calleigh. None of them could figure out what Ash was going to attempt. The monster was as perplexed by Ash's actions as Calleigh and the rest were. A blast of black energy welled up inside the monster's jaw, but he did not released. Instead, he stared down at Ash as he made his move. Ash's sword fell to the ground with a metallic clang. Ash dropped to his knees before the creature and bowed his head.

"I have come before you to beg for mercy." Ash's words were met with gasps from his furiends and family. "I will serve you in whatever capacity you see fit on the condition that you spare this world."

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Ash's wings folded down in submission. His nine tails ceased to flick about and remained still. A deep rumbling laugh came from the back of the monster's throat.

"Good. Good. I accept your proposition, little fox. You will serve me as my herald when I go forth to other worlds to conquer. What is your name, my servant?"

"Ash. And, what, may I ask, is the name of the exalted being that I now serve with the utmost reverence?"

"Eteil'me, my child. I am the great Eteil'me."

"Eteil'me."

"Excellent. Now I shall cleanse you of this vile angel spirit."

"Thank you."

The tone of Ash's voice did not seem to register with the monster. Eteil'me leaned in and took both of Ash's wings in one massive claw. He jerked and ripped both wings from Ash's back. A growl of pain came from Ash's tightly clenched muzzle. He spread his paws on the pavement between him and Eteil'me. Blue light sprung up from between his fingers. The asphalt of the street cracked in all directions. More blue light shone up from the cracks then the space where Ash and Eteil'me were was swallowed up in an explosion of blue fire. Calleigh stared in horror. Ash had arrived a short time ago and now he was gone again forever. She dropped her head into her paws and sobbed. Cole wrapped his arms around his sister's shoulders and held her.

Cole turned his head and looked at the thinning cloud of dust. Something stood up in the middle of the plume of dust. Jake saw it too and readied his arrow, waiting for a clear shot. The dust cloud suddenly spread out in every direction as a pair of large, feathered wings was given one powerful flap. The dust cleared instantly revealing Ash standing before them with not one



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scratch on his body. Calleigh and Cole got to Ash before any of the others. Ash saw two raccoons he did not know move to the rubble of a storefront. Jake dropped down from his rooftop perch and strode over and clapped Ash on the back.

“Glad you could join us.” Jake joked.

“Well, for a while there, it didn’t look like I’d make it in time for the party, but here I am.” Ash replied with a smile.

The two raccoons had gone to dig out Zach from where he had been thrown. They helped Zach over to the others. He was limping and there was blood running through the fur on the right side of his face. Zach smiled at Ash despite the obvious pain he was in. Ash returned his smile then looked from the taller raccoon to the shorter. Something about them seemed oddly familiar. The look in their eyes. His curious stare caught the attention of the two raccoons. They both gave Ash warm, friendly smiles. Ash looked questioningly from the raccoons to Calleigh.

“Who are these two?” Ash asked.

“I’m Sean. This is my younger brother Dan.” The shorter raccoon pointed from himself to the taller one as he spoke. “We’re the....”

“Browning brothers?” Ash completed his sentence.

“Yeah? How’d you know our last name?” the tall one, Dan, asked.

“Long story.” Ash spoke as he scanned the faces of the furs gathered before him. There was one face he did not see. “Where’s Micah?”

“He’s at the hospital,” Calleigh told him, “He’s in a coma.”

\* \* \*

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*ASH* strode in the main entrance of the hospital. He had left the others to help anyfur trapped by the battle. There were few furs in the hospital besides the patients, a few visitors and some doctors and nurses walking back and forth. Ash walked up to a young chipmunk wearing a nurse's uniform. He inquired about his brother and she told him the room number he needed. Thanking her, Ash ran off down the hall. The nurse smiled to herself and continued on her rounds. Ash turned the corner and slowed to a stop in front of the door. He laid his paw on the door handle and turned it. The door swung away from him.

Walking inside, the first thing he noticed was that there were two beds in the room. One of the beds was empty, but the other had two furs in it. Cassie lay beside Micah on his bed. She, too, was wearing a hospital gown. Ash figured the other bed must have been hers. He walked around to the other side where he could see both of their faces. Ash looked down and smiled at the pair lying peacefully next to one another. Ash glanced around the room at all the different machines and gadgets that were constantly beeping and producing whirring noises. Ash looked down and saw the silver bracelet on Cassie's left wrist. He touched it gingerly.

Cassie's eyes fluttered opened. Ash looked into her eyes, watching as her pupils shrank from the large black discs they become. She blinked rapidly a couple times to let her eyes adjust to the brightness of the room. She looked up into Ash's blue eyes. The looked on her face seemed to be a mixture of confusion and something else. Ash gave her a big smile. Cassie's face lit up with excitement. With one finger on her left paw, Cassie gently poked Micah in the stomach. A soft moan came out of his muzzle as he, too, woke from sleep. Micah looked at Cassie to what the matter was. She raised her left paw and pointed towards Ash. Micah nearly jumped out of the bed when he saw Ash.

"You're back!" he cried.

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“Yes, I am,” Ash said, “They told me you were in a coma?”

“I got better.” Micah said grinning widely.

“He came out of the coma about half an hour ago. He just woke up.” Cassie said.

“So, bro, when’d you get back?” Micah grinned up at Ash.

“Oddly enough, about half an hour ago.” Ash said slightly puzzled, “Kinda strange, don’t ya think?”

“Well, nothing surprises me anymore.” Micah said in a *matter-of-factly* tone.

“Same goes for me!” Cassie put in as she slid off the bed.

Micah sat up and moved closer to the edge of the bed. He put his arms around his brother and squeezed. Ash returned the hug and squeezed even tighter. Cassie walked around the bed and just smiled at the two foxes. They looked so much alike they could have been twins though they were three years apart. Ash looked over at Cassie. Placing a paw on her shoulder, Ash pulled her in and hugged her as well.

“Thank you for looking after him.” Ash said softly into her ear.

“Your welcome,” Cassie said as she pulled away. “I was happy to do it.”

Cassie sat back on the of the bed and Ash took a chair. For the longest time, the three young furs sat in silence. When Cassie asked Ash about the other dimension he was in, Ash was perplexed that she knew. Micah explained that they had filled her in after she had brought him back to life two days before. After that, Ash told the two of them every detail about his adventure through the world of the Humans. As he spoke, Micah and Cassie continuously exchanged looks of wonderment and awe. The part that interested them the most was the presence of humans that shared names with furs they lived and ate with every day of the year.

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Ash did not care. He was just glad to be back home with his brother and all his friends and family.

THE END