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

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## **PART 1**

### **PROLOGUE**

From the roof of a nearby building, Bryan watched as Jesse and Victor fought Eteil'me with their furiends and family. Bryan grinned to himself as Eteil'me sent one of those mangy wolves flying through the air. Bryan turned his attention to the young leopard perched on a rooftop with a bow and arrow.

“Victor’s punk, I presume.” he sneered.

The leopard’s arrow had little affect against Eteil’mes exceptional healing abilities. Eteil’mes raised his arms and created eight black skinned monsters. One of them was destroyed by Victor’s son before it could finish solidifying. The leopard was a good shot, Bryan had to give him that. Bryan watched his old furiends as they discovered that their weapons could not pierce the creatures’ skin. The only female fur among the group was the first to discover the one and only weakness of these monsters.

*Must be Ash’s bitch,* Bryan thought to himself. *Oh well, if everything goes to plan, then we won’t have to worry about her at all.*

*I hope your right, Bryan,* Kordak scolded.

The rest followed her lead and began crowding around the monsters, pushing them into a tight circle. Bryan smiled to himself. The heroes did not know it, but they were playing right into his paws.

*Our servant should be about ready for the transference.* Bryan’s grin widened.

“Three... two... one!”

Dark clouds formed overhead. Bryan watched in amusement as small bolts of lightning rained down from the sky. His mirth only increased as some of the bolts connected and resolved into a sphere of roiling blue-purple electricity. Bryan’s eyes went to the circle of purple light underneath the creatures. The large bolt of lightning Bryan was expecting to come next jolted from the sky. Just as five smaller bolts of lightning incinerated the seven creatures, the massive one from the sky hit them from above.

## BURNING ASH

*Yes!*

The ground split open. Bryan could see down into the crater better than any of the others. He saw Ash's mangled body writhing at the body of the crater. He smiled. He was not worried about Ash's survival. *My brother will see that he survives the damage inflicted on him by the transfer*, Kordak whispered in the back of Bryan's head. Bryan nodded. *But, he will not survive Eteil'me*. There was a slight crackling noise behind him. Bryan turned to see his servant standing in a fading transportation ring. There was no sign of destruction under the traveler's paws. His servant walked forward and knelt before Bryan.

"Rise, Dr. Hunter." Bryan said.

Todd Hunter rose from his knees and glared at the back of Bryan's head as he turned around. He did not walk to the edge of the roof to stand beside his master.

"I see you have succeeded in bringing Ash back precisely when I commanded. I congratulate you."

"Spare me. I only did this because you took something from me. Something I want back. Now!"

"Not yet, I have a few more things I need you to attend to. Besides, she's much better off under my wing."

"We had a deal!"

"I'm altering the deal! Pray I don't alter it any further! Worthless feline."

"But, she's my daughter for God's sake! She's only eight years old! And..."

"And, I saved her life when complications set in when she was born!"

"But, my wife died!"

"True. But, if it weren't for me, you would have nothing! You owe me your soul for this, but all I'm doing is getting you to run a few errands for me."

Todd fell silent at that. He would have rather just given up his soul instead of this deal he was forced into. He had met, married and lost his wife in the years leading up to when he got his job at the high school. Everything he has done seemingly to help Ash and the world, had all been for Bryan and his twisted plan to takeover the world. Unfortunately, Bryan had not seen fit to fill Todd in on the finer points of his scheme. Kordak, through Bryan's eyes watched Ash destroy Eteil'me and was furious.

"Damn! We have work to do and you're going to help me."

"What?" The word came out harsh and malicious.

"If you do this, you will be reunited with your precious kitten."

"What must I do?" Now, Todd's voice was calm and controlled.

An evil grin stretched across Bryan's muzzle.

*~One week later~*

# BURNING ASH

*ASH* leaned against a wall in the Sommers' home. He watched as all his friends and family milled about the room. It was a Friday. And, it was New Year's Eve. Mr. and Mrs. Sommers had invited everyone to their home to celebrate. They were celebrating many things. The New Year, Cassie's birthday, Ash's safe return and Micah's miraculous recovery. Ash could not help but smile to himself, as Mrs. Sommers was frantically worrying about everyone present but herself. She was constantly asking them all if they had enough to eat and drink. Calleigh walked over and stood beside him. She was wearing the necklace he had bought her for Christmas. Ash thought it looked even more beautiful on her than he had imagined.

Calleigh leaned in and kissed Ash on the cheek. He turned and kissed her, too. A high-pitched whistle came from the other side of the room. Ash and Calleigh turned and saw Micah grinning at them and waving. Cassie sat beside him. She was hunched over. By the motions of her shoulders, Ash was sure she had doubled over with laughter. Ash pointed a playfully menacing finger at his brother. Micah just kept on waving. Ash smiled and looked away. He noticed for the first time that Cole and Jake were nowhere to be seen. Ash gave Calleigh a quizzical glance. She looked back at him, slightly confused.

"What?" she said softly.

"Where's your twin?" Ash asked her.

"How should I know?"

"Your twins. I thought you were supposed to go everywhere together and know where the other was at any given moment? Finish each other's sentences? That kind of stuff."

## BURNING ASH

“You’re making fun of me.”

“Of course, I am. But, seriously, you don’t know where Cole went?”

“Nope.”

Ash frowned. First, he vanished now Cole and Jake are missing. Ash shook his head. *You’re getting too paranoid, he thought, Stop it. They probably just stepped out for a minute. Together. Could they be...?* No sooner had he thought this, did Cole and Jake walk into the room from the kitchen. They walked in holding paws. Everyfur in the room stopped dead in their tracks when they saw Cole and Jake. They were all waiting for somefur to say something. All eyes went to Mr. and Mrs. Sommers and Victor. Jake shuffled uncomfortably next to Cole. Ash saw Cole squeeze Jake’s paw harder to comfort him.

Mrs. Sommers rose from her seat and walked over to the two of them. She put her arms around Cole and whispered something in his ear. Cole nodded solemnly as his mother released him and turned to Jake. Jake hung his head a little, starting to think this had been a bad idea from the start. Mrs. Sommers put her arms around Jake and gave him a warm, loving hug. She kissed him on the cheek before letting go of him completely. Jake stared at her blankly for a little bit. He was trying to figure out what just happened. He glanced at Cole, who was grinning from ear to ear. Victor walked over to Jake.

“You could have just said something.” Victor told his son.

“Yeah, but I thought everyfur should find out together.” Cole spoke before Jake could.

“And, it was worth it to see the look on all of your faces.” Jake said. “It let us know just how big of a shock it was. We were hoping no fur suspected anything.”

Ash noticed that Calleigh’s ear twitched when Jake said this. For a long time no fur spoke. There was only the sound of hindpaws shuffling back and forth on the carpet. Ash

## *BURNING ASH*

looked around at everyfur's faces. He decided to take a chance and risk making a fool of himself. Ash raised his glass in the air.

"To Cole and Jake." Ash said. "May you live happily ever after, as the saying goes."

"To Cole and Jake." everyfur else repeated.

Cole and Jake both blushed at the sudden exaltation from their furiends and family. Cole walked over to Ash and pointed a menacing finger at him.

"You'll get yours, Ash Reynolds." Cole said, trying his best not to smile.

"I'd like to see you try." Ash said grinning.

The room erupted in laughter. Cole laughed as well. Cole and Ash shook paws then Cole turned and hugged his twin. Calleigh had not been as surprised by the revelation that her twin was gay as Ash thought she should have been. She had suspected. Calleigh had suspected the truth since the day that Jake got them from the hospital. He and Cole were constantly sharing glances that day and when Calleigh had noticed, they had both blushed and turned away. Calleigh did not say anything, though. She just smiled and hugged her brother. Ash walked over to Jake and clapped him on the shoulder.

"You wanna know something?" Ash said for only Jake to hear.

"What?" the curious feline asked.

"When I was in that other world, I met other versions of furs I know. I met another version of you."

"And?"

"He mentioned his own boyfuriend every now and again."

"Creepy." Jake said, his eyes going wide.

"Yeah, kinda." Ash lifted his glass and took a sip of his wine.

## *BURNING ASH*

“That’s how you already knew Dan and Sean’s names?”

“Yep, their doubles helped me get back here.”

Jake nodded and looked around to find Cole. He was standing at the other side of the room talking with Micah and Cassie. One side of Cassie’s shirt was wet. Ash turned to Jake with a confused look on his face. Jake shrugged and walked over to join Cole. Ash watched the pair for a while. In doing so, he soon surmised that the shock from the revelation had caused Micah to spray the quantity of soda in his mouth out onto Cassie’s shirt. He smiled to himself. It had seemed that Micah spent more time with Cole than anyone save for Calleigh. Micah probably felt he should have noticed, or been warned ahead of time. Cole would probably get an earful over it. And even Cole’s ears were not large enough to hold all that Micah would fill them with.

Mr. Sommers called from in front of the TV. The ball was about to drop signaling the start of the New Year. The gathered furs huddled around the television set. The counter at the bottom of the picture had started at thirty seconds. Ash and the others watched the screen intently as the camera panned around at the gathered crowd and then back to the ball for the last ten seconds. The ball started to descend towards the ground. The furs counted down as the ball dropped.

*Ten. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six.*

The ball was half way to the bottom when the lights began to flash brighter and change colors more often.

*Five. Four. Three. Two. One.*

The ball hit the bottom. In an explosion of light, a large sign reading *2010* flickered to life. The New Year had begun. Ash reached over and grabbed Calleigh around the waist and pulled her in for a passionate kiss. Like an airborne virus, Jesse kissed Lilia. Mr. and Mrs.

## *BURNING ASH*

Sommers wrapped their arms around each other and kissed. Cassie, with a grin on her face, grabbed Micah by his neck, turning him to face her. They, too, kissed deeply. Cole took Jake by his elbow and spun him around. Jake did not need any further convincing than that. Cole put his arms around Jake's waist. Jake held Cole's head in his paws and closed his eyes and leaned into the kiss. Zach and Victor merely shook paws and wished the other a Happy New Year.

After everyfur decided to stop kissing one another, they started going around saying their "Happy New Years" and hugging and clasping paws. Once this was done, they all settled down to visit for a few more hours and finish off the two bottles of wine they had opened. Cassie and Micah sat on the floor beside each other with a can of soda in their paws. Micah looked at Cassie sideways and gave her a wink. Then he stood and began to feign being drunk. He was stumbling around the room and bumping into furs and furniture left and right. Cassie was in stitches. She was rolling on the floor laughing her head off. Micah stumbled over to Ash and bumped into him.

"Scuse me shur. I wash jush pashing through and..." Micah slurred his words. He turned and looked up at Calleigh and straightened up "Hello, miss. How are you doing, this fine evening? Do I come here often?"

Calleigh rolled her eyes. "You better get back over there before Cass comes over here and puts the arm on you."

"Pleasure speaking with you. Bye!" Micah turned and trotted back to where Cassie was sitting on the carpet.

Cassie just shook her head and flattened out her ears. Micah flopped down beside her and smiled broadly. Cassie laughed and gave him a playful little shove. While the others laughed at Micah and Cassie, Calleigh set her wine glass on the table and tugged on Ash's

## *BURNING ASH*

shirtsleeve. He set his glass down and followed her out of the living room. They grabbed their coats off the rack and walked out of the house into gentle snow falling outside. The two of them crossed the snow-covered lawn and set off down the sidewalk.



*ASH* and Calleigh came around the corner. They each had one arm around the others waist. There was a light breeze, but it was not as cold as Ash thought it should have been at 1:00 A.M. Particularly on January first. Calleigh walked with her head resting on Ash's shoulder. Ash glanced around at the other houses in the neighborhood. There were plenty of lights on in the houses. Some furs would probably be celebrating till very early in the morning. Ash shook his head. Calleigh looked up at his face.

"What?" she asked.

"I was just thinking how long some of these families might be partying." Ash informed her.

"All damn day, if you let them."

"True." Ash agreed shaking his head. "I, on the other paw, will have to go to bed at some point."

"Me, too. I can almost feel the warmth of my bed."

"Well, I was thinking my bed, but if that's the way you wanna play it, then fine by me."

"What does that mean?"

Ash made a face like he was confused. "What does what mean?"

"You know what." Calleigh gave Ash a firm poke with her finger.

"I don't know what you're talking about."



## BURNING ASH

Ash said this and walked a little ways in front of Calleigh after she had stopped. He turned and smiled at her. His smile faded when he saw the snowball in her paws. Ash raised his arms to shield his face as the snowball left Calleigh's paw and sailed towards Ash. The snowball splattered against his arms. Calleigh, however, already had another snowball when Ash lowered his arms and she smacked him right in the muzzle. The force of the impact caused Ash to lose balance and fall backwards onto the snow-covered sidewalk. Calleigh doubled over laughing.

"Okay, I see how it is. You knock me over and leave me here. I see." Ash reached into his coat pocket as he rose to one knee. "And, just when I was about to give you this."

Ash held up a small felt case, small enough to rest in the palm of his paw. Calleigh's eyes went to it for a few minutes before understanding showed in her face. She walked closer to Ash and took the case from him. She raised it to eye level and pulled back the top. Her eyes were wider than Ash had ever seen them. The wind began to pick up. Neither Ash nor Calleigh seemed to notice it that much. Calleigh looked up from the diamond ring nestled inside the case. Her eyes left the ring and met Ash's. He was grinning broadly, once more.

"Ash."

"Well?"

"I don't know what to say."

"I can think of one thing I'd like to hear you say."

Ash tried to stand up, but the force with which the wind was blowing now caused him to lose his balance again. Ash stumbled into the center of the road. The wind kicked up a lot of the snow on the ground just as new snow began to fall. He heard a voice over the wind. *What's happening?* The voice was not so much over the wind, as it was the wind. He did not recognize the voice. He looked to Calleigh to see if she heard the voice as well. She stood rooted in place

## *BURNING ASH*

looking at Ash as if the wind was not blowing at all. With one great gust of wind, Calleigh was blown away as if she were made of nothing more than sand. The ring and its case disappeared in a similar fashion.

Ash half expected he'd go next. He began to feel a bit strange. He looked down at himself. His clothes were being destroyed the same way Calleigh had been. His thick coat was replaced by a lighter weight jacket. His blue jeans were now black and tattered around the cuffs. Bracelets and rings he remembered giving to Micah were back on his fingers and wrists. He could still hear the voice speaking through the wind. Ash soon realized that there were three voices speaking simultaneously, instead of just one. He listened, trying to place at least one of the voices. Before he could, light fell across him. The light illuminated the snow-covered ground and a bicycle lying on its side not too far from Ash.

The light was from the headlights of a car barreling towards him. Ash rose and tried to jump clear. The street now had a thin layer of ice on it that was not there a minute ago. Ash's shoes could not get traction. His hindpaws slipped from underneath him and he fell forward. He came down hard, hitting his forehead against the sidewalk. He heard the sound of screeching tires and squealing brakes. Ash lifted himself a little ways off the ground. The snow under his head was red with blood. He rolled over onto his back. A car door slammed. The sound of snow crunching under heavy pawfalls grew louder as the driver came to check on Ash. The driver was an older grey-wolf with a slightly brown tinge to his fur. Ash looked into the driver's eyes. They were a shade of blue he'd only seen two places before. One was Zach Sommers. The other was his father, who stood over him now. Ash was confused by this.

*Mr. Sommers was in the house when Calleigh and I left?*

## *BURNING ASH*

Ash's eyelids began to fall. He had hit his head pretty bad. As he faded into unconsciousness, he heard the wolf call to the house they were in front of.

"Help! Cole! Cole! Call an ambulance!"

"Dad? What happened? Oh my God." The second voice was definitely Calleigh's.

"Just call the paramedics!" The next statement was directed at Ash. "Son? Are you all right? Help's on the way. You're gonna..."

Ash missed the rest of the wolf's comforting words as he blacked out completely. The paramedics arrived a few minutes later and took him to the hospital.

\* \* \*

*ASH* woke up staring at the sterile ceiling of a hospital room. He heard the various beeps and whistles that came with being in a hospital. Ash listened to the beeps. He could hear the bustle of the hospital outside the closed door. He sat up a little and looked around the room. He was completely by himself. He felt a cold sensation in his right arm. He looked and found an IV needle in his arm. The needle in his arm limited Ash's use of that appendage. The door to the room opened. A doctor walked in. He was a tall, muscular feline with short black fur and dark green eyes. The feline held a silver chart in one paw. He walked to the bed.

"Morning. I'm Dr. Archer. And, you're Ash Reynolds. Or, at least that's what your driver's license says."

"Yeah, that's me. Where am I?"

"Furrtown Medical Center. Medics brought you in about 1:45 this morning. You've been out for nearly ten hours."

"Ten hours." Ash repeated to himself.

## BURNING ASH

Dr. Archer walked over to one of the machines in the room nodding his head. He turned a few dials on one or two of the machines. He reached up and adjusted the drip now that Ash was awake. He jotted some notes down on the chart. Ash glanced up at the cat's face. There was no mistaking it now. It was definitely Cassie's father, Paul. He seemed not to recognize Ash just as Mr. Sommers had not. Ash hung his head. Paul placed one paw on his shoulder and pushed him back flat on the bed. He walked around to the other side of the bed and fiddled with some of the instruments there. After a few minutes, Paul walked to the foot of the bed and looked at Ash.

"There's a detective outside who wants to talk to you. You feel up to it?"

Ash thought for a minute. *Why would a cop want to talk to me*, he thought. He said, "Sure."

Paul nodded and left the room. Ash only had a minute to gather his thoughts. He tried to remember exactly what had happened. He had ridden his bike from Clawson to Furrtown and had lost his balance when a heavy gust of wind knocked him over.... *No! That's not what happened!* He had been out walking with Calleigh when the wind had gotten stronger.

"The hell is..."

"The hell is right. What were you doing in the middle of that street at one in the morning, Mr. Reynolds?"

Ash looked up into the brown eyes of Victor O'Connell.

"I'm Detective O'Connell with the Furrtown PD. Now, do you wanna tell me what you were doing, or am I gonna have to get rough with you?"

## BURNING ASH

Ash thought a minute. Which story should he tell? He was no longer sure which had actually taken place. Uncertain as to why, he decided to go with the memory he had not had before now.

“I was out riding my bike when the wind came up and knocked me over. Then a car came and I tried to get out of the way. Must have slipped and hit my head.”

“What were you thinking, riding a bicycle from Clawson to Furrtown that late at night in the kind of weather we’ve been having?”

“I had had a long week at work and just decided to take off and go for a ride. I wasn’t really paying attention to where I was going.”

Ash was starting to worry himself. He had two separate memories of how he ended up outside the Sommers’ house at one in the morning. Both memories felt real. And, as he told the second one to this detective with Victor’s face, he knew that what he was saying seemed just as true as if he had given him the other story. Ash closed his eyes and thought for a moment. He could hear the scratching sound of a pencil on paper. Detective O’Connell was taking notes. O’Connell cleared his throat.

“Mr. Reynolds, are you in any sort of legal trouble back in Clawson?”

“No. The hell kind of question is that?”

“A routine one.” The detective walked to the table beside the bed. “Nice collar you have hear. This real gold?”

“Yeah.” *How do I even know what he’s talking about?*

“Must have cost a pretty penny. What did you say you...did?”

Detective O’Connell went silent. Ash turned his head to look at the leopard cop. The cop was holding a black leather collar in his paws. The collar itself was made of two straps of

## BURNING ASH

leather, one large and the other small. The smaller one was set around the other and had a gold tag attached to it. He was staring at the solid gold pendant dangling from the collar. His eyes were wide with fear. Abruptly, he placed the collar back on the table and went to the door.

“Good day, Mr. Reynolds. I hope you get feeling better.”

Detective O’Connell opened the door and almost ran into a young, female panther carrying a small silver tray. He begged her pardon and disappeared out the door. The catgirl walked to the bed and set the tray on the bed beside Ash. She gave him a warm smile. Very gently, she peeled the bandage off of his forehead. Ash knew the girl. It was Cassie. Ash did not say anything. Up until now, he had met two furs performing jobs that they should not have been qualified for. This Cassie finished applying the new bandage, but did not leave. Ash looked at her quizzically.

“I want to ask you something.”

“Okay.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Huh?” *Play along, for now.*

“Do you recognize me at all? Because, I recognize you.”

“Cassie.”

“Oh, Ash. I was getting worried that I was the only fur that knew something was wrong.”

“I was beginning to wonder the same thing. What do you remember about last night?”

“I was with you and everyfur else at the Sommers’ celebrating New Years and...”

“What?”

“No, I was at home with my father. He made me go to bed right after the ball dropped. We had to get up early this morning to come here. Why do I have two memories of last night?”

*BURNING ASH*

“Probably for the same reason I do. Somefur’s fucked with the timeline somehow, but we weren’t affected. Or, at least, we weren’t affected as completely as the others.”

“Do you know if we’re the only ones, or what?”

“No.”

“Ash, I’m scared. I tried to call Micah, but couldn’t reach him. Do you know why?”

Ash thought for a moment, or two. He tried to remember the last time he had seen Micah. He could see him sitting on the floor beside Cassie. Micah was laughing with Cassie over the way he had been acting. A dreadful image flashed in Ash’s head. He closed his eyes to get rid of the image.

“Ash?”

“I guess it’s possible that in this place, he doesn’t have a cell phone. We also live in Clawson, not at the house you’d remember.”

“True. I’d better go. I’ve got other patients to visit.”

“We’ll figure this out, Cass. I know we will.”

Cassie smiled at him again and left the room with her tray. She got to the door and opened it. Cassie was almost knocked over by her own father as he came through the door.

“Oops! I’m sorry, Cass.”

“One, or both of us should be more careful.”

“Perhaps, both. How’s he doing?”

“Fine. I just changed the bandage on his forehead. Now, I have to be off. See ya later, dad.”

“Bye.”

## *BURNING ASH*

Cassie closed the door as she left. Dr. Archer walked around to the side of the bed and looked down at Ash. He began tinkering with some of the devices connected to Ash. He spoke as he worked.

“Well, we were able to reach your mother. She just called to let us now she’d be here in a few minutes.”

Archer paused as he concentrated on sliding the IV needle out of Ash’s arm. He disconnected the EKG leads on his chest and turned the machine off.

“Your clothes are over there on that table. If you have the strength, you can get dressed. Oh, one more thing. Your right ankle is sprained pretty badly. You’d probably want to stay off of it for a few days.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Do you want a set of crutches?”

“No, I’ll be all right.”

“I took some samples of your blood for testing. I’ll give you a call when we get the results back.”

“Okay.”

“Also, there’s a girl outside that was wondering if she could come in a speak with you. What do you think?”

Hoisting himself out of the bed, Ash looked at the doctor. “Why not?”

Dr. Archer just shrugged and left the room. Ash walked over to the table and began getting dressed. He had just finished pulling on the second of two shirts he had been wearing when he noticed the collar again. He picked it up and, without even thinking, secured it around his neck. When he realized, he walked to the mirror to look at the pendant on the collar. The



## BURNING ASH

symbol engraved there was one Ash recognized from another lifetime. It was the symbol of the demon Kordak, who had been bonded with Ash many years before, in a reality that no longer existed. Ash turned away from the mirror and came face to face with a wolfgirl about his age.

*Calleigh!*

“Hello. I’m Calleigh Sommers. My father almost hit you with our car.”

“Oh, really.”

“Yeah. I just wanted to come see if you were all right. Are you?”

“Yes. Except for a sprained ankle, I’ve never felt better. Have we ever met before?”

Ash decided to risk it. “I’m having the strangest sense of déjà vu.”

“Nope, can’t say that we have. Maybe it’s the meds?”

“Maybe.” Ash thought she sounded a tad noncommittal. *Is she hiding something?*

Calleigh’s eyes went to the pendant on his collar. A new emotion flashed across her face. It was too brief for Ash to make out. One second it was there, the next, gone. She started fidgeting in a way Ash had not even seen his own Calleigh fidget. She began shuffling to the door. She opened it and stepped through. Before she closed the door, Calleigh turned.

“I have to go. Bye.”

Ash stared at the closed door. Now he knew that Calleigh was a lost cause. He wondered about Cole. And, for that matter, Zach and Jake. Would any of them be affected like himself? And, what about his mother? What would the encounter with her be like when she arrived at the hospital to get him? Ash limped to the bed and sat himself on the edge. He hung his head and closed his eyes. Ash recalled the image he had seen earlier. The image was of an overturned car. The car itself had been consumed in flames as well as the driver and his young passenger.

## *BURNING ASH*

“God, not again.” Ash raised one paw to his forehead and rested his elbow on his leg. “Why did they have to die again?”

The door opened behind him. He turned and saw his mother standing in the doorway. He slid off the bed carefully and staggered towards her. She met him halfway and wrapped her arms around him. Now the moment of truth. Would his mother be like him and Cassie, or like Victor and Calleigh? His mother pushed him away to look him up and down. There were tears in her eyes. Ash gave her a weak smile and raised his eyebrows in concern. Lilia chuckled a bit and put her arms around her son again. Ash grabbed his coat and the two of them left the hospital. Lilia helped Ash into the passenger side of her car while she climbed into the driver’s seat. She started the car and they drove off towards Clawson.

\* \* \*

*LILIA* turned the car into the driveway a little over two hours later. She looked at her son. He seemed to be asleep. Gently, she placed a paw on his shoulder and woke him. Ash’s eyes opened and he turned to look at her.

“We’re home.” Lilia said, lovingly.

Ash smiled and climbed from the car. Lilia got out and hurried around to see if he needed any help. Ash did not need the help, but he did not decline the offer either. As Lilia helped him to the front door, Ash looked over the house. It was exactly as he remembered it the day he and his mother had moved away seven years before in another life. Slowly and with his mother’s help, Ash made his way through the front door and on into the living room. He lowered himself carefully on to the sofa. His mother left and returned with a cup of hot

## *BURNING ASH*

chocolate. He took the mug from her and sipped at the contents. Ash drank some more and sat the half full mug on the table. Leaning his head back, he closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Ash began to dream. He saw himself at the age of thirteen. He was playing in the front yard with some furs his own age. They were throwing a baseball back and forth between one another. One of the furs, a tiger, threw the ball and accidentally hit the fur, a young zebra, closest to Ash in the stomach. The boyfur, beside Ash, after catching his breath, threw his glove to the ground and bounded towards the thrower. He pounced on him. The two of them were rolling around the yard trying to hit the other. Two of the of the other furs just stood off to the side and watched. Ash watched as his younger self shook his head and went to break to the two up. Ash looked up and saw a car turn onto the street further down.

He turned his attention back on the two boyfurs rolling on the ground and his younger self, trying to break them up. To his credit, the younger Ash broke the two apart and got them to their hindpaws. The two boys, however, started pushing each other again. The front door to the house opened and his mother, Lilia, walked onto the porch. She called for them to stop, but they did not. The three of them were close to the edge of the street. The two fighters went for each other one more time, but the young Ash jumped between them. They both swung a balled fist. The zebra's fist hit Ash in the muzzle, the tiger's landed in his gut.

Young Ash was sent stumbling into the street. He tripped and fell over backwards, hitting his head hard on the pavement. The approaching car slammed on its breaks. The wheels locked and the car started to slide. The car was now skidding sideways towards the unconscious form of Ash the younger. The wheels caught and the car flipped up off the road. The car soared just feet above the young fox. It slammed into the ground and continued tumbling. Ash watched as the car tumbled for a hundred feet or more. The car finally stopped and landed on its roof.

## *BURNING ASH*

Lilia walked down into the yard, the boys stopped fighting. The young Ash picked himself up off the ground and looked around. He caught sight of the car.

Ash walked towards the car and was met halfway by his younger self. Ash got down on his paws and knees and looked into the car. His father, Jesse, was in the front seat. Blood covered a good part of his face. Ash smelled gasoline leaking as well. Ash walked around to the passenger side and saw a small foxboy, about ten years old, crawling out of the window. *Micah!* There was a spark. The gasoline burst into flames. The flames traveled back towards the car. The entire car exploded in a bright ball of orange flames. There was a muffled wail of pain as Micah was consumed by the fire. The young Ash dropped to his knees, tears streaming from his eyes.

Ash's eyes shot open. He was being shaken by somefur. He looked up and into the eyes of a strange male horse standing over him. There was concern in the horse's eyes. Ash looked and found his mother standing at the end of the couch. The horse helped Ash into a sitting position then took a step back. Ash was breathing hard and tried to calm himself. He used the moment to try and remember who the horse was.

"Is he all right, Cameron?" His mother asked the horse.

"He seems to be a little shaken." The horse replied. "You have a bad dream, son?"

Cameron Scott. His stepfather. "Yeah."

"You wanna talk about it?"

"It was about the day Micah and my father died." Ash dropped his head into his paws. He was determined to try and press the image from his mind, but could not.

"Now, Ash, that was not your fault. It was an accident." Lilia began. "We've talked about this before. It wouldn't even have happened if those two had stopped fighting."

## BURNING ASH

“No, it wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t tried to break them up.”

“You did the right thing in trying to separate them.” Cameron spoke. “Jesse would have been proud of you.”

Ash wanted to say something snide, but decided against it for fear of speaking out of character. He needed time to sort through the new memories he had and try to at least play the part of this version of himself. Ash let out a sigh and raised a paw to rub his forehead. Where he had hit his head on the sidewalk was pounding. As he applied pressure, the pain began to subside. He saw Cameron rise and move away. Ash looked up and saw that his mother had left the room. He smelled food and figure she was in the kitchen. Bracing himself, Ash carefully rose from the couch and headed towards the dinner table. He glanced at his watch for the first time since he’d awoken and discovered that he had slept for just over four hours.

Ash tried to help set the table but his mother and Cameron would not let him. So, he was forced to sit down and merely wait. As he waited, Ash began to sort through the mess in his head. He found the memory of his mother’s marriage to Cameron. They had been married four years after Jesse and Micah had been killed. They met the year before that. The two had met at one of Lilia’s weekly Angel Congregations.... *Angel Congregations!?* Ash thought about it for a minute and the answer popped into his head. In this reality, when Ash was fifteen, angels and demons broke into this world and took over. Now, nearly every fur on the planet was part of either an Angelic Church or a Demonic Cult. Ash’s thought turned to the collar on his neck and he knew exactly which he was part of.

*Fuckin’ perfect.*

Lilia walked to the table with three plates in her paws. She set one down in front of each chair then walked back to the stove. Cameron placed a bowl along side the plates then returned

## *BURNING ASH*

to the kitchen area. Cameron came back first and placed a large bowl of salad in the corner of the table. With the pair tongs in the bowl, he placed a portion of the salad in Ash's bowl. Ash would have rather gotten his own, but he did not say anything. He had not gotten the chance to determine what this Ash's feelings were towards the horse stepfather. Lilia re-entered the dining room carrying a large dish of lasagna. She set in the center of the table and, with the serving spoon, placed a good-sized portion on Ash's plate then she placed one on Cameron's plate.

She served herself then sat down. She and Cameron closed their eyes and lowered their heads. Ash watched them carefully and determined that they were praying silently. Almost simultaneously, the two of them lifted small coins and pressed them to their lips. Ash sat quietly through the whole thing. He did not want to disturb them, but nor did he have the urge to join them. He waited until they had begun eating to start. Neither of them said anything, so he figured he had acted way the he should have. Halfway through dinner the phone started ringing. Cameron got up from the table and walked to the phone. He lifted it from its cradle and held it to his ear.

"Hello? Yeah, he's right here. Ash it's for you."

Ash took the phone and got up from the table and staggered into the kitchen. He leaned against the counter so he would not fall over.

"Hello?" Ash spoke cautiously into the receiver.

"Hey, Ash. It's me." The voice was a female's. And, one he surprisingly recognized, but the name that went with the voice disturbed him slightly.

"Hey, Bianca. How are you?"

"I'm fine. How're you?"

*BURNING ASH*

“Could be better.”

“Why? What happened?”

“I’ll tell you about it some other time. What did you want?”

“I was calling to see if you were coming to the gathering tonight.” She paused. “Are you?”

“Probably not. I’ve been a little under the weather. I think I’m just gonna stay inside tonight. Could you cover for me?”

“Sure. What are mates for? Okay, hope you get to feeling better. Bye, see you Monday, I guess.”

“Sure. Monday. Bye.”

There was a click at the other end of the line. Ash let his arm fall to his side. Now, he had more things to sort out. He was *furiends*, *she said mates*, with a girlfriend who just happened to share the same name with a human vampire that he ran into a few weeks back in another dimension. *Fuck, this place is so screwed up.* He shook his head and walked back into the dining room. He went to put the phone back in its place when his entire left arm from the elbow down went strangely numb. The phone slipped from his paw and clattered to the floor. His head began to pound again as well. He lost his balance and stumbled a little. Cameron was up and caught him before he fell.

“Ash? Are you okay?”

“I feel....” Ash did not finish his sentence as he blacked out and sank to the floor. Cameron lowered Ash to the floor and placed him flat on his back. Small amounts of blood were oozing from Ash’s nostrils. Cameron bent over and placed his head against Ash’s chest. He was breathing, but each breath seemed to be a struggle for the young fox. His mother was almost

## *BURNING ASH*

hysterical. Lilia was out of her chair and on the floor beside her son in a second. They determined that Ash was out of any immediate danger. Cameron lifted Ash off the floor with relative ease and carried him upstairs to his room. Together, he and Lilia undressed Ash and place him in the bed. They left the room and closed the door behind them.

\* \* \*

*CASSIE* lay in her bed staring at the ceiling. It was Sunday morning. Just the day before, she had woken up in this bed and had suddenly become a nurse at the hospital. Her father was also a doctor at the same hospital. Cassie had seen Ash. He had suffered the same as her. Cassie had two sets of memories. Her memories were the same up until the point where she had met Micah for the first time. One of the two sets were the ones she had had with Micah and his family. Micah was nowhere to be found in the other of the two. It was as if he did not even exist. She continually told herself that he had to exist. Micah had to be here. And, she had to find him. She pulled the covers back and slid out of bed.

She left her room and walked into the bathroom. She turned on the water to let it get warm. She pulled off her pajamas and looked in the mirror. She had turned eighteen the day before. She had not noticed because of the discrepancies with the timeline of events. Cassie shook her head and stepped into the shower. She relaxed her muscles as the water went cascading over her, matting her fur to the skin underneath. Cassie raised her face towards the ceiling. She pushed the hair from her face and closed her eyes. She envisioned the day she had first met Micah. She had run into him the day the Reynolds had moved into the neighborhood. She had fallen in love with him at that moment, but she had not said anything for a year. Cassie had been infected by a demon at her birth and was not sure how Micah would take that.



## BURNING ASH

Fortunately for her, when Micah did find out, he told her that it did not matter and had nothing to do with why he loved her. She had also learned that his brother, Ash, had been bonded to an angel and that he was training to hunt demons and monsters with his father and brother. She loved him so much. She loved him, and now he was gone. Most furs would have given up easily and said he was gone forever and then sat down and cried. They would have cried and been no use to anyfur.

“Good thing I’m not most furs.” Cassie was talking more to herself than to anyfur in particular.

There came a knock at the bathroom door. Then there was a voice.

“Cass? Breakfast is ready when you are.” Her father called to her.

“Okay.” She called back.

She stood under the water for another minute or two. Sighing, Cassie turned off the water and got out of the shower. She grabbed a towel and started drying herself off. Her paw found the burn on her right side. She turned so she could see it in the mirror. Cassie had shown it to Micah, but he had not known what it meant. She had not shown it to anyfur else. *Maybe Ash would know*, she thought. She laughed at the idea. Ash had enough problems of his own right now to worry about a silly little thing like a burn she had had all of her life. Checking to make sure the coast was clear, Cassie walked from the bathroom to her bedroom and got dressed. After putting on the rest of her clothes she picked up the two matching silver bracelets and slid them over her paws. The bracelets did not quite fit, they never had. They sagged a little when she lowered her arms to her sides.

Cassie left her room and tossed her towel in the laundry room as she passed by. She walked into the kitchen and found her father standing over a pan of frying bacon. There were

## *BURNING ASH*

already two plates with eggs on them sitting on the counter by the stove. Cassie poured herself a glass of orange juice and sat down at the table. She sipped her juice and looked out the window. Snow fell lightly past the window on its way to the ground. Maybe she would go outside later. Her father walked to the table carrying two plates. He set one down in front of Cassie and placed the other across from her. The telephone rang. Paul took a bite of bacon then walked to the phone and answered it.

“Hello?” There was a pause as the fur at the other end relayed the information they had. “Are you sure? All right, all right. Could you run the tests again? I know it’ll take time, but could you? I want to be sure about this before I go ruin somefur’s life. Okay. Thank you.”

Paul put the phone back in its cradle and walked back to the table. He lowered himself into his chair and let out a sigh. He picked up his fork and began eating. Cassie chewed on the piece of bacon she had in her mouth and watched her father closely. She knew from experience in her own world and from memories from this one that her father was not about to offer any information. Cassie would have to coax it out of him. She had become good at it as her father was like this often. Particularly when the conversation turned to her mother.

“Dad?” Cassie said.

“What?” He replied softly.

“Who was that?”

“Nobody. Don’t worry about it.”

“Dad.”

“Cass. Please.”

“C’mon, Dad. You can talk to me. I mean, who am I gonna tell, right?”

“You’re not gonna let this go, are you?”

*BURNING ASH*

“Have I ever?” As soon as she said it, Cassie realized that that statement might not be entirely true.

“No, you never have.”

Paul sighed. He lifted his coffee mug and took a long sip from it. Cassie watched him carefully as he drank. Paul set the mug back on the table and looked at his daughter. He put his paws on the table. He began fidgeting with his fork. Cassie was really worried. She had never seen her father act this way, even during the conversations about her mother.

“Do you remember that fox they brought in yesterday?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Well, I took some blood samples and sent them to the lab.”

“Was that the lab?”

“Yes, it was. They got the results just a little while ago. And, well, it doesn’t look good, but I asked them to run the tests again.”

“Why? What did they find?”

Her father fell silent.

“Dad?”

“If the results are the same I’ll call him and ask him to come in tomorrow.”

\* \* \*

*ASH* woke up in his bed. He rolled over and looked at the clock beside his bed. According to the digital display it was five o’clock in the morning on Monday, January 3rd. At first he was thrown, but he soon figured out what had happened. He had fallen unconscious Saturday night. His mother and Cameron must have carried him up to his room. *I think I missed Sunday*, Ash

## *BURNING ASH*

thought. Sighing to himself about that, Ash slid out of bed and went to get a shower. As he stood under the running water, Ash collected his thoughts and tried to figure out what he was going to do. He had to find out who was behind this. He had to get together with Cassie and find out who else was unaffected. He had to...

Go to work?

While he was soaking in the shower, Ash remembered that in this world, he had a job. He was a web designer for a big advertising firm. Ash got out of the shower and walked to his room to get dressed. He got dressed almost without thinking. Before long, Ash was standing in his room wearing a pair of neatly pressed grey slacks and a white long-sleeve dress shirt. Holding a tie in one paw and his collar in the other, Ash sat down on the bed. He was not sure if he should wear the tie or the collar. Wearing both would have been too impractical. But, he also knew that he had to wear the collar, or something else that bore the symbol, as part of the rules of the Cult he was in. Ash rose from the bed and walked back to his dresser. He opened the top drawer and peered inside. He did not immediately find what he was looking for.

Truth be told, at first, Ash was not even sure what it was he was looking for. When he did find it, Ash understood exactly why he was looking for it. The object was a leather wristband. The two ends of the band clasped together with four metal snaps. In the exact center of the strip there was a small gold medallion set in the leather. The medallion also bore the Sign of Kordak. Reluctantly, Ash snapped the leather wristband around his right wrist. Grabbing his watch and rings, Ash left his room and headed downstairs to get something to eat. He eyed the gold medallion the whole way down. The fact that he even had it made it seem like he had had to make this kind of decision before. He thought about the medallion, the Cult and Kordak as he

## *BURNING ASH*

ate his breakfast and as he drove to work. Ash wondered if it was just Kordak, or if he was bonded with Bryan Mayer in this reality.

He pulled his car into the underground parking lot beneath the building where he worked. It was just like any other office building except that it housed several different businesses. Ash turned off the engine and climbed out of the car. He grabbed the bag that contained his laptop and slung it over his shoulder. Ash began walking towards the elevator that would take him up into the building. He passed two vehicles that seemed to be out of place. One was an ordinary black, four-door sedan. The other was a large grey SUV. Both vehicles were very nondescript, but still something about them bothered Ash. He continued past them and entered the elevator. He continued to eye the cars as the door closed.

Ash looked around the inside of the elevator. He was alone. Ash looked up and watched the digital display as the red numbers counted up. When the numbers reached twenty-eight, the elevator stopped and the doors slid open. Ash stepped out of the elevator and weaved his way through the maze of cubicles and found his own. Ash set his computer on the desk and looked around the room. He was surprised to realize that he immediately recognized every face in the room except for three furs. Two of the furs were male raccoons, while the third was a female otter. The three looked very out of place. They were talking with a tall, lean looking horse. Ash lowered himself into his chair and turned on his computer.

There was a knock on the outside of the cubicle wall. Ash looked around and saw a fur about his height and age. The fur was a male black-backed jackal with deep brown eyes. He was dressed similarly to Ash, except that his slacks were black and he wore no tie. The top button of his shirt was unbuttoned and his sleeves had been turned up two times. Around his neck was a black collar with a solid gold pendant hanging from it. Ash knew who he was. This

*BURNING ASH*

jackal was Harry Richardson. He knew they were friends in this world, but Ash remembered the name as belonging to a human in yet another world, as well. Ash turned in his chair to face the jackal more fully. Harry reached into the cubicle behind him and pulled the chair out and sat down.

“How’re you holding up, buddy?” Harry’s voice was strained, but sincere.

“Fine, I guess. Why?” Ash studied Harry’s face. “Is something wrong?”

“You mean, you haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Julie’s dead.”

“What!?”

“She was found sometime Saturday. She had come in early to finish something up. Well, that’s what we’ve been told at least.”

“How did she die?”

“Cops say it was murder. I can’t for the life of me think of anybody that would want to kill her, though. And, why? She’s never hurt anybody.”

“Now look, Harry, calm down. Maybe, Julie was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“She was found on this floor. Who would want to break into an advertising firm?”

“Right, I see your point.”

Ash looked away from Harry’s face and saw the horse he had seen speaking with the otter coming towards him. Ash recognized the horse now that he saw his face with his glasses resting between his green eyes. The horse’s name was Daryn Weaver. Ash had first known him as a calculus teacher in high school. What he was doing as the head of an advertising firm in

## *BURNING ASH*

Clawson was beyond Ash. Mr. Weaver stopped beside Harry and touched him on the shoulder. It was a light touch, more like a tap, that told Harry to give them some privacy. Harry nodded and rose from his chair. He rolled the chair back into its cubicle and walked off towards his own workstation.

“Ash.”

“Sir?”

“The police want to talk to you.” Mr. Weaver turned and started walking away.

Ash stood up and followed Weaver. “Why?”

“They didn’t say. I figured it had something to do with you and Julie being furiends for a long time. Guess they think you might be able to tell them if she had any enemies, or something like that.”

Mr. Weaver stopped in front of the door to one of the conference rooms. Ash heard voices on the other side. The horse patted him on the shoulder and turned away. Taking a deep breath, Ash opened the door and limped in. In the room, Ash found the two raccoons and the otter he had seen. Now that he saw their faces up close, he recognized all three of them. The shorter of the two raccoons stepped forward. He was wearing a brown suit with a police badge hanging out of the top pocket. The other raccoon wore a deep red turtleneck shirt and beige cargo pants. The otter had on a pair of khaki slacks and a white, long-sleeve shirt. A khaki coat, matching the slacks, hung on the back of one of the chairs.

“I’m Detective Sean Browning, with the Clawson PD.” The raccoon in the suit said. “This is Jacqueline Price and Daniel Browning.”

“We’re with the Crime Lab.” Jacqueline Price added.

## *BURNING ASH*

Ash recognized the otter immediately as she spoke. Though she had her hair hanging down over her shoulders, the otter was definitely the Grand-Master he had met so long ago.

“What’s this all about?” Ash braced himself for the answer.

“You’re aware that Ms. Julie Christensen was found dead on this floor?”

“I found out about it this morning.”

“She was murdered Saturday morning,” Daniel Browning said. “Her body was found later that day.”

“How did she die?”

“Her jugular vein, brachial artery and femoral artery were each severed. She bled to death in seconds.” Jacqueline Price tossed photos onto the table in front of Ash as she spoke. “There was evidence of a struggle. There was also DNA and hairs under her claws. She fought back.”

“Good for her.” Ash’s words were sincere.

“Bad for you.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Ash was startled.

“Only employees have access to this floor.” Jacqueline chose her words carefully. “The DNA told us that the murderer is male. Doesn’t really help that much, though does it?”

“However, the hairs,” Daniel interrupted. “That identified the perp as a red fox. And, you are the only male red fox with access to this floor.”

“I didn’t kill her!”

“Well, if that’s true, where were you at around nine last Saturday morning?” This time it was Detective Browning that spoke.



## *BURNING ASH*

“I was lying in a bed at Furrtown Medical Center. You can call and ask them yourselves.”

“We’ll do just that.” Detective Browning took out his cell and stepped towards the far corner.

Daniel Browning looked to Jacqueline then spoke to Ash. “Would you mind giving us a DNA sample so that we might rule you out as a suspect, if you are indeed innocent?”

In response, Ash just opened his mouth wide enough for the criminalist to rub the inside of his cheek for the sample they needed. Ash glared back at the three furs accusing him of murder.

“You can go about your business, Mr. Reynolds, but don’t leave town.” Daniel said.

Ash turned and left the conference room. When he got back to his cubicle, Ash dropped into the chair and held his head in his paws. Ash decided to busy himself with work. There was not much for him to do aside from fixing two broken links and adding one new folder to hold some of the newer works produced by the firm. Though he had other things he could do, Ash could not take his mind off of Julie for the moment. When Harry had first mentioned her, the only image Ash could come up with to go with the name was a female human with blonde hair and green eyes. He thought harder, hoping to find something in the other set of memories. He did. The Julie of this world was a squirrel with short blonde hair and loving green eyes.

Ash looked at the clock on his computer screen. He must have worked longer than he thought; it was nearly time for lunch. Ash leaned back in his chair and continued thinking about Julie. He tried to think if she did have any enemies. In all the memories he had, Julie ever being in trouble was not among them. She was the model fur. No fur wanted her harmed in any way, let alone dead. And yet she was dead. Murdered. Something did not add up.

## *BURNING ASH*

“Ash?”

Ash nearly jumped out of his fur. Ash looked over his shoulder to find Mr. Weaver standing behind him. The horse had come up behind him so silently it startled Ash.

“You all right?” Mr. Weaver took a step closer.

“You just startled me, that’s all.” Ash straightened up in his chair. “Was there something you needed?”

“You’re about to go to lunch now, aren’t you?” Ash nodded and Mr. Weaver continued. “Since you just found out today, why don’t you take the rest of the day off? You can go home and rest, or whatever. Okay?”

Ash thought about that for a moment. He decided that he could use the rest of the day to sort through everything and maybe figure out what had gone wrong.

“All right. Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.”

The large horse turned and walked away. Ash sat in his chair for another minute then stood up. Closing his laptop, he picked it up and slid it into the bag. Few spoke to him as he walked towards the elevator. Most of what was said was words of sympathy and consolation. Ash largely ignored their words as he stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the parking garage. When the elevator stopped at the bottom, there was a ding just before the doors slid apart. Ash stepped out of the elevator and noticed that the sedan and SUV were gone. They must have belonged to the detective and the forensic scientists. Ash kept walking. When he rounded the corner, he saw a female rabbit leaning against the door on the rear-driver’s side of his car. She had long jet black hair that stood out from the short white fur covering the rest of

*BURNING ASH*

her body. She wore blue jeans and a hooded sweater. There was a pair of woven gloves on her paws and white tennis shoes on her hindpaws. She also wore a black collar around her throat.

“Surprise!” She shouted as Ash neared the car.

“Hey, Bianca.”

He recognized her voice from the phone conversation, otherwise, Ash would not have known who she was for nothing had jumped to the front of his mind. As he drew closer, Bianca stepped to him and kissed him lightly on the cheek. Ash returned the kiss almost before he knew what he was doing. Bianca stepped back and looked at Ash.

“I came so you could take me to lunch.” Bianca grinned playfully.

“Well, how very thoughtful of me. Climb in.”

Ash moved and unlocked the car door. He put his computer in the back seat and got behind the wheel. Bianca was already sitting in the passenger seat with her seatbelt fastened. Bianca waited quietly for Ash to fasten his own seatbelt before she spoke again.

“So, where are you taking me?”

“Where would you like to go?” Ash started up the car and backed out of the parking space. Bianca thought as Ash navigated the maze-like structure that was the underground lot.

“There’s a new Japanese steak house over on 9th and 41st. I’ve been wanting to try it out. I’ve heard the foods really good and it’s cheap, too”

“9th and 41st, you say?”

“Yup.”

Ash pulled the car out into the street and headed towards the restaurant.

\* \* \*

## *BURNING ASH*

*ASH* sat beside Bianca as they watched the chef prepare their meal right in front of them. Bianca commented once that she did not see how the cook had not sliced even one of his fingers off. The chef finished their food, gave a deep bow and moved on to help another customer. They ate for a few minutes in silence. Bianca was right, though. The food was quite good. Just then, Ash got the feeling that he was being watched very carefully. He glanced at Bianca and noticed she was looking at him. He looked back at her and waited. When she did not say anything Ash turned to face her a little better.

“What?” Ash tried to keep any annoyance out of his voice. It seemed to work.

“I was just wondering what happened to you.”

“Happened to me? What do you mean?”

Bianca rolled her eyes. “Your head, silly.”

“Oh, that. I hit my head pretty hard Saturday.” It was not a total lie. “I was out for a good part of the day.”

“That’s why you couldn’t come to the gathering, right?”

“Right.”

“But, you’re all right now?”

“Yeah, except for the occasional headache, I’m fit as a fiddle.”

Bianca smiled at the comment and turned back to her food. Ash studied her a few more seconds then looked back at his own plate. Suddenly, his cell phone rang. Ash pulled it out and looked at the display. The display read “MOM”. He flipped the phone open and put it to his ear.

“Hello?”

Bianca watched Ash as he listened. Ash never said a word; he just nodded and made little noises of agreement. His eyes darted around the room. It was something Ash seemed to do

## *BURNING ASH*

when he was sorting through information and deciding how to act on it. Bianca finished her plate of food while Ash was on the phone. Ash pulled the phone away from his ear and closed it. He took a deep breath to clear his mind. He lifted a piece of chicken to his mouth and ate it. He wiped his mouth with his napkin and rose from his chair. Bianca turned and looked up at him.

“That was my mom. I have to go. Sorry. Can you make it home from here, or do you need a ride?”

“I’ll be fine. Oh, there’s an unscheduled gathering tonight. Are you gonna be able to make it?”

“I don’t know. I have to go over to Furrstown. That’s a three-hour drive to and from. If I can’t make it, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Maybe. Bye. Be careful.”

“I will.”

Ash turned and walked towards the door. He glanced back over his shoulder and saw Bianca still looking after him. He gave her a little wave then he was out the door. Ash walked to his car and climbed in. Putting the key in the ignition and turning it, Ash started the car and drove off. In a few short minutes he was pulling into the driveway of his house. Before he got to the door, his mother and Cameron met him on the porch. The three of them clambered into Cameron’s car and started off towards Furrstown. After pressure from his mother, Ash told them of Julie Christensen’s murder. Cameron almost rear-ended the car in front of them when Ash told of how he was the prime suspect.

“But, you and her have been furiends since you were in second grade.” Lilia was now looking into the backseat at her son.

## *BURNING ASH*

“First grade. And, I know. The whole thing is unbelievable. I wasn’t even in Clawson when they say she was killed.”

“Did you tell them that?” This time, it was Cameron who spoke.

“Yes. I even told them I was at the hospital and that they could call there if they’d like. I think they did. I just remembered that one of them told me not to leave town and that’s precisely what I’m doing.”

“Well, Dr. Archer said it was very important that you come in today. Besides, it shouldn’t matter if you’re innocent.”

“If I’m innocent?”

“You know what I mean.” Cameron cut Ash a look in the rearview mirror.

It was pretty quiet in the car the rest of the way to Furrtown Medical Center. Lilia turned on the radio and turned it to a classic rock station to break the silence. They caught the end of a song that Ash did not recognize. After that song ended the station identification was played then the weather report was given. There was another commercial then the next song began to play. As he listened to the song, Ash could not help but think of Calleigh. It seemed that the song was written about her in a way. Ash found that it described her perfectly. Her voice was soft and cool, her eyes were clear and bright. And, Calleigh was not there. Ash turned and looked out the window at the other cars on the busy highway. Ash laid his head back and closed his eyes.

He must have fallen asleep because when he opened his eyes again, they were pulling up in front of the hospital. Ash got out of the car and walked into the hospital with Lilia and Cameron. They walked to the reception desk and asked for Dr. Archer. The nurse behind the desk paged the doctor. Ash watched her and realized that she looked familiar. The nurse was a young, slender chipmunk with large brown eyes. Dr. Archer walked up and greeted them then

## *BURNING ASH*

led them to his office. Ash glanced back at the nurse and she gave him a large warm smile. He returned the smile then followed the doctor around to his office. At the door, Dr. Archer stopped and turned around.

“May I talk to Ash privately for a moment?” His voice was strained, almost sad.

His parents nodded and Dr. Archer opened the door and stepped in. Ash followed him, but caught sight of Cassie watching from the end of the hall. Dr. Archer closed the door behind Ash and offered him a seat. Ash thanked him and sat down. He waited quietly while the panther moved around to his own chair and lowered himself into it. There was a manila folder lying open on the desk. Ash’s name was printed across the tab on the side. Dr. Archer cleared his throat then started to speak.

“You remember I told you that I sent a sample of you blood to be tested?”

“Yes.”

“Well, I have the results here.”

“And?”

“And, I don’t like what I see.”

Dr. Archer handed the folder to Ash for him to look over. **BLOOD TEST RESULTS FOR ASH REYNOLDS** was printed across the top of the front page. Ash scanned the pages, but found he understood very little of what was there. He looked up at Dr. Archer for some clue as to what he was reading.

“What am I supposed to see?”

“Well, the blood test shows that you have a rare and incurable disease.”

“Oh, is that all.” Ash’s response was snide.

## *BURNING ASH*

“This is serious, Mr. Reynolds.” Dr. Archer seemed on the verge of a breakdown. “You could die at any time. This disease is so rare, no doctor alive can even tell us how it’s contracted. We don’t even know enough about it to name it properly. There’s a chance that you could give it to your mate, if you have one. And, unless you enjoy watching little kids die, don’t have any.”

“Funny. So, there’s nothing I can do for it?”

“Not that we know of. I’m not sure how long you have. You could live for another few years, or...”

“I could die tomorrow?”

Dr. Archer merely shrugged. Ash was becoming agitated. The thought that he might die before he could get Cassie home and back to Micah made him furious. Ash closed the folder and put it back on the desk. He needed to clear his head. Without saying anything to the doctor, Ash rose from the chair and left the office. He walked past his parents without even looking at them. He wondered if he should find Cassie and tell her. He wondered if she already knew. Ash stopped paying attention to where he was going. He just let his hindpaws take him where they wanted to go. Soon, Ash found himself outside where a light snow had begun to fall. He started across the street and stepped up onto the curb on the opposite side.

On down the sidewalk, there was a small gathering of furs. They were all standing in front of what appeared to Ash as a dance club. Ash set off towards the crowd. It was indeed a dance club. According to the sign on the wall, this was the club’s opening night and admission was free. Ash got swept up in the crowd and, before he knew it, he was inside. Ash made his way through the crowd and took a stool at the bar. With his back to the dance floor, he did not catch the roving eyes of a pair of wolves at a table on the far side of the bar. One of the wolves,



## BURNING ASH

a female, rose from the table and walked to the bar. The other quickly rose and followed after her. She walked up to the bar and stood a little ways down from Ash. The bartender walked over to her.

“What can I get you?” The bartender raised his voice a little.

“Two beers, please.” The wolfgirl’s voice was soft and cool.

Ash’s ears twitched. Ash glanced down the bar at the two wolves. His ears had not deceived him, for at the bar stood the twins Calleigh and Cole Sommers. Ash already knew that Calleigh was completely affected by what had happened. He was not sure about Cole, but he could not speak to him with Calleigh there. Calleigh turned and looked at him. She did not look happy. Her eyes were no longer clear and bright. They were cold and dark. Ash turned away and tried to look as if he had not seen her. The bartender started moving towards him. So did Calleigh. *Maybe she won’t try anything*, Ash thought to himself. Calleigh moved up and stood right beside him. Ash acted like he had not noticed her. The bartender stopped in front of him.

“What’ll you have?”

“Surprise me.” Ash was not in the mood for anything to fancy.

The bartender’s paws disappeared behind the bar for a few moments. While Ash waited, Cole walked down to stand next to his sister. The bartender set a glass of something down in front of Ash then walked off. Ash lifted the glass and took a sip. The liquid was scotch. Calleigh sat down on the stool next to Ash and continued glaring at him. Finally, Ash could not take it anymore. He sighed.

“What?” He did not bother to look at her.

“Look at me when you talk to me!” Her voice was harsh.

Ash turned to face her. “Why?”

## *BURNING ASH*

“Cause I’m bitch like that.”

“Sorry.” Ash finished his drink then rose from the stool.

He wanted to get away before something happened. He turned, but Calleigh caught him by the arm and spun him around. When he was facing her completely, Calleigh slapped him hard across the face. The noise level around the bar dropped as furs turned from their drinks and conversation to see what would follow. Ash just stood there. He was not going to retaliate. He could not bring himself to do anything. Despite the obvious differences, she was still Calleigh and he would never hurt her. Calleigh moved to slap him again when Cole stepped between them and grabbed her arm. Ash did not hear him say a word, but he could see Cole’s paws and fingers moving very rapidly in strange motions. Calleigh turned in a huff and walked back to their table across the dance floor.

Cole sighed and turned to look at Ash. “Let’s go outside.”

Ash walked alongside Cole towards the door. They stepped outside and walked down the sidewalk to the nearest street corner. Cole pulled his coat close around his body to keep out the cold. Ash kept his eyes on Cole’s face, glancing away only to see if Calleigh would come hurtling towards him with a sword in paw.

“She’s deaf.”

“What?” Cole’s words caught him off guard.

“Calleigh’s deaf. Has been since like last Friday night. Or, so I’ve gathered.”

“But, the other day at the hospital, she came in and we talked?”

“She reads lips really well.”

“Oh, well, I’m sorry about what happened to her.”

*BURNING ASH*

“Well, for some reason, she thinks you had something to do with it. Might be because of that thing on your wrist.”

Ash raised his arm and looked at the gold coin set in the leather band.

Cole sighed. “Look, this might sound crazy, but I know you had nothing to do with it.”

“Doesn’t sound crazy to me.”

“Wait, it gets better. I know you didn’t do it because last Friday you, Calleigh and I went to the movies. We were out all night.”

Ash’s eyes got wide. He allowed himself to smile for a moment.

“Ash. Tell me you know what I’m talking about.”

“I do. Everything got out of whack around...”

“One o’clock Saturday morning?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know if any of the others...?”

“Cassie’s with us. She’s the only one I know of.”

“What about Micah?”

“Dead.”

“Shit. I’m sorry.”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” Cole’s face was twisted in confusion. Ash waved a dismissive paw. “Long story. We don’t have that kinda time.”

“Right. I should go back inside. See you around?”

“Is your cell number the same?”

“Far as I know. Yours?”

“Yeah. I’ll call you. Let me know if you find anyfur else that can help us.”

## *BURNING ASH*

Cole nodded and walked back towards the club entrance. Ash watched after him. He wondered when, or if, he should tell Cole about his disease. Once Cole was inside, Ash turned and headed back towards the hospital. He got to the main entrance just as his mother and Cameron were coming out. He looked past them and into the hospital. The chipmunk nurse was still sitting at the reception desk. She seemed to be watching the Reynolds family carefully. Ash figured she was merely worried. There was a chance that she already knew about his predicament. *She had seemed like she cared*, Ash thought to himself. *Maybe she's watching over me, or something.* Ash smiled at the thought. Lilia threw her arms around her son once they were close enough together. Ash returned the hug, squeezing just a little. Lilia squeezed back then let go of him. Cameron walked up and touched him caringly on the shoulder. The Ash of this world may not have thought much of Cameron as a father, but he was one of the best friends one could ask for.

Cameron walked to where they had parked the car and unlocked the doors. Ash and Lilia followed after him and they all got in the car. Cameron turned the car on and put the heat on high. He pulled the car away from the curb and made a u-turn. They past in front of the dance club Ash had gone in. As they drove by, Ash saw Cole and Calleigh walked out the front door. They were both smiling now. Ash watched the two of them. Cole noticed the car and looked. He saw Ash in the back seat and gave him the most discrete of nods. Ash followed Cole and Calleigh with his eyes until they were lost in the snowfall. Ash turned and settled back into his seat. He began to wonder. Would everything be all right? Would he die before he could make things right? Could he even make things right if he did live long enough? Ash put his head back and closed his eyes.

*Everything will be all right.*

## BURNING ASH



COLE sat on the floor leaning against the wall in his room. In one paw he held his cell phone. With the fingers of the other, he drummed on the floor. He constantly turned the phone over and over in his paw trying to decide what to do. *Should I call him, or just go?* Cole sighed and cursed himself. He was not worried about anyone hearing him. He was alone in the house except for Calleigh, and she could not hear at all. The only thing keeping him from calling was the uncertainty of who would actually answer the phone. That, and Cole had no idea how much different he was. He cast his eyes about his own room. There were posters for heavy metal and punk rock bands he had not known even existed until he woke up last Saturday morning. The photo of a strange tigress he had never met, but knew of as his girlfriend. He sighed and chuckled.

“And, I’m straight. Fuck.”

Cole tossed the phone up onto the bed and stood up from the floor. He walked to a large chest that was sitting in one corner of the room. Since Saturday, he had wanted to look inside but could never bring himself to do it. *Now’s as good a time as any.* Cole walked over to the chest and looked down at it. Bending over, he wrapped his paws around the handles on the side. He lifted the chest from the floor and carried it towards his bed. Cole sat on the edge of the bed and placed the chest on the floor in front of him. The chest was sealed with a padlock. Cole looked around for the key. He could not find it. Taking a deep breath, Cole calmed himself and thought hard on the key. Without thinking, Cole got down on his paws and knees and looked under the bed.

## *BURNING ASH*

There was a silver key lodged between the mattress and one of the springs of the bed. Cole reached under the bed and grabbed it. He sat back on the bed and put the key into the lock and turned it. There was a click then the lock fell away from the chest. It thudded against the floor. Cole suddenly wondered if Calleigh could feel the vibrations. He shrugged. Perhaps she would not come to see what he was doing. He lifted the top and looked inside. The chest was full of swords and knives, all of varying sizes. Cole rifled through the chest for a few minutes. Much to his surprise, he found a pair of familiar short swords near the bottom of the chest. The scabbards and hilts, however, were caked in dust. They had not been used in quite a long time. Cole put the swords back in the chest. He glanced up and something caught his eye. He raised his head to better scrutinize what had gotten his attention. It was a journal of sorts, strapped to the underside of the trunk lid.

Cole pulled the journal out and looked at it. The word 'MARKS' was embossed across the front of the journal. His curiosity piqued, Cole pulled back the front cover of the book. The first page was a typed message. Cole read it:

Cole Sommers, Knight of Dûrfëa,

Here follows the list of furs that have been deemed too sinful to be allowed to taint your beautiful world. Your task is to track down these sinners. Once you find one of them, you will destroy them. Fear not, my son. You will find that you have already been forgiven for the blood you will undoubtedly spill. You are doing a great service to the faithful furs of the world.

Have faith, my child.

Dûrfëa

Cole finished reading the letter then turned the page. The next page had a picture of a male fur along with his name, address and place of work. There was also a smear of blood underneath the photograph. Cole turned the page. He turned it again. For twenty pages, there

## BURNING ASH

was a photo, name, address, work place and a blood smear. Cole figured out that the blood most likely belonged to the fur in the photo and that they were dead.

“And, I killed them.”

He was not sure why, but he could not help but turn the page one more time. On the next page he would find the next fur he had to kill. When he saw the photo on the next page, Cole gasped and dropped the book. The book hit the floor and flopped open to the page he had just seen. The photo in the top corner was of a male leopard approximately twenty years old. The leopard’s name was printed beside the photo. Jacob Peter O’Connell. He was listed as being unemployed. Under the photo, where the bloodstains had been on the others, was a new header. Cole lifted the book, looked at the words under the picture and shivered.

### SIN: Homosexuality

Cole was horrified. Jake was being targeted for being who he was. Cole’s horror slowly became burning hatred for this Dûrfëa he was apparently a *knight* for. Cole closed the book and threw it into the chest. Slamming the lid, Cole stalked to the closet to get dressed. He was torn between calling, and going to see Jake earlier, but now nothing could hold him back from going. Cole pulled on his jeans and long-sleeve shirt. He slipped his hindpaws into his shoes and tied the laces. Over his shirt, he pulled a lightweight hoodie. Cole left his room and went downstairs to get his coat and a pair of gloves. When he got to the kitchen, he found Calleigh sitting at the counter eating a bowl of cereal.

She looked up from her bowl and smiled at her twin. Cole returned the smile and signed to her that he was going out and did not know when he would be home. Calleigh merely nodded and smiled again then turned her attention back to her cereal. Cole left the house and started down the sidewalk. From the page in the book, Cole knew that Jake’s address was no different.

## BURNING ASH

Cole walked slowly at first. He was trying to avoid looking too conspicuous. It did not seem to be working out too well. He past by a yard with two kits running around and their mother was standing up on the porch. When she caught sight of him, the mother practically leapt off her porch and ran to her kits. Cole looked away from them and began walking faster. Soon, he was sprinting down the sidewalk.

Cole rounded the corner and skidded to a stop. Jake's house was right across the street from where he stood now. There was a car sitting in the driveway. Cole leaned against a tree to wait and catch his breath. As he waited, the door to the house opened. Two leopards came out. The first one was tall and broad at the shoulders. He wore a long black trench coat over his clothes. Victor O'Connell, Jake's father. The second stayed just inside the opened door. Cole could recognize Jake from where he stood on the other side of the road. Victor got in the car and drove off. Jake gave him one last wave then stepped back inside the house. Cole watched after the car and waited until it had turned the corner to start across the street. Cole walked up to the front door and knocked. He waited.

Cole made sure to stand where he could be seen through the peephole. He waited a little longer then heard pawfalls behind the door. The door opened. Jake stood in the doorway and stared blankly at Cole. *I was afraid of this*, Cole thought. Cole cleared his throat and began to speak.

"Hi, sorry to bother you, but, um, do you know who I am?" *That's the best you can come up with?*

"Yeah, I do."

*This is promising*, Cole thought.



## *BURNING ASH*

“You’re Cole Sommers, Right Paw of Dûrfëa. The police call you the Executioner. What? Have you come here to kill me?”

Cole took a step back. “Why would I want to kill you?”

“Because, according to your all-knowing angel, I’m gay. And, that’s a problem for him.”

“I didn’t come here to kill you. I don’t want to kill you! I don’t want to kill anyfur!”

“Why? Having a change of heart?”

Cole stood rooted in place. He was wondering how he should respond? What could he possibly say?

“Because, I love you.”

Before Cole knew what was going on, Jake’s paw shot out and grabbed the collar of his coat and jerked him into the house. The door shut behind him. Jake wrapped his arms around Cole’s neck and kissed him deeply. Cole put his arms around Jake and returned the show of affection. Neither of them knew how long they kissed, but so to, did neither of them want it to end. Cole pulled away first. He stared at Jake, one ear flopping over in confusion. Jake gave him a crooked smile and led him into the kitchen. Jake motioned for Cole to take a seat then he moved to the counter. Cole put his jacket up on the counter. Jake pulled a mug from a cabinet and set it on the counter. He poured something in the mug and set it in front of Cole. Cole lifted the mug and drank from it. It was hot chocolate and Cole found that it was the best he had ever had.

“I didn’t know you could fix hot chocolate this could.”

Jake smiled sheepishly. “I can’t.”

Cole cocked his head to one side. Jake reached behind him and grabbed something from the counter. He set the box in his paw down in front of Cole. The box contained little sealed

## *BURNING ASH*

packets of instant hot chocolate. Cole looked up from the box and raised one eyebrow. Jake shrugged and started laughing. Soon, both were laughing loudly. Cole and Jake finished their hot chocolate then went to Jake's room so they could talk. Jake closed the door behind Cole then moved to the window and closed the blinds. Jake flopped down on the bed and motioned for Cole to take a seat. Cole sat down on the edge of the bed and glanced around the room. There were very few posters hanging on the walls and the only photograph was of a female leopard. Jake's mother. She had died before Cole had ever met Jake.

“What are you thinkin' about?” Jake's words startled Cole back to reality.

“How did you know all that stuff about me?” Cole lied.

“My dad's a cop. And, I've been reading old issues of the newspaper ever since Saturday morning. They've been trying to nail you for the murders of like twenty furs. They're pretty sure you did it, but they have no definitive evidence. They figured out you were tracking so-called sinners and six of them had been gay, so my dad told me about the case so I could stay away from you.”

“And, now I'm sitting on the foot of your bed.” Cole looked around the room. “Brilliant move.”

“Thank you.”

“That wasn't a compliment.”

“I know. So, what's going on? I mean one second we're sleeping together then we're in our own beds and mortal enemies.”

“I don't know what happened. Ash and Cassie have noticed the change, too. They're the only other ones I know of.”

“Calleigh doesn't know?”

## *BURNING ASH*

“Nope, she’s probably the most far gone of all of them. She’s deaf and she blames Ash. She wants him dead.”

“Well, fuck, what are we gonna do?”

“Dunno. Ash is gonna call me when he thinks of something.”

“When I see those blue eyes and those wings of his, I’m gonna kiss him till he turns so red you can see it through the fur on his face.”

“Don’t get too excited. He doesn’t have wings. He’s been separated from that angel. Apparently, we have to do this the old-fashioned way.”

Jake thought a minute. He jumped up from the bed and ran for the door. He opened it and took off down the hall. Cole listened to the thudding of Jake’s hindpaws as he ran down the stairs. Cole waited. Jake was gone for a few minutes. From across the house, Cole heard Jake yelp. In another minute, Jake was back in the room and the door closed. Jake carried a large leather-bound book with tattered edges. Jake tossed the book down on the bed then sat back down across from Cole. As he sat down, Jake rubbed the top of his head gingerly. Jake looked up at Cole and gave him a weak smile. He opened the book and began flipping through the pages. Cole sat on the foot of the bed and watched Jake turning the pages slowly, one at a time. Jake leaned in close over the pages to read the notes in the side. Cole let out a little chuckle that got Jake’s attention.

“What?” Jake raised an eyebrow at his guest.

“Did you know you’re sexy when you do research?” Cole’s tone was playful.

“Yes, but thanks for noticing.”

## *BURNING ASH*

Cole stood up to stretch his legs. “So, let me get this straight. Your father’s a cop and afraid that I might come to kill you and yet, he still goes on stakeouts that last God knows how long and leaves you here unprotected. Am I getting this right?”

“Open the closet.”

Cole walked to the closet and pulled back the door. “Whoa!”

“Yeah.”

In the closet there was a small armory. On the right-paw wall there were firearms of varying types. Small pawguns and even some larger assault rifles. There was a box of ammunition sitting on the floor underneath the guns. The back wall was covered in wall hangers holding various swords and knives. Two spears were leaned up in the corner where the two walls met. Cole turned and looked at the left-paw wall. A large wooden bow hung on the wall. Cole reached in and lifted the bow carefully from the hooks it was on. Cole held the bow and pulled on the string. The handle of the bow was padded and there were thin strips of gold inlaid along the curved form of the bow. A quiver of arrows hung from a hook beside the bow. Cole looked at the arrows. There must have been at least sixty arrows in the quiver and there was a box on the shelf at the top of the closet that had ‘ARROWS’ written across the side.

“Got enough arrows?” Cole eyed the leopard on the bed.

“No, I keep telling my dad that I need more. I mean, I only have about two- or three-hundred arrows in that closet.”

“In ‘this’ closet? How many are there in the entire house?”

“Almost a thousand, I think. And, that’s not including the crossbow bolts. I don’t know how many of those there are.”

Cole looked at Jake’s face. “You joking, right?”

*BURNING ASH*

“Of course, I am. Who in their right mind keeps a thousand arrows lying around the house and only has two bows to use them with?”

“Somefur lookin’ to start a war, I guess.”

“Yeah. Well, I’ve flipped through this book twice and determined that the ritual we’re looking for is on the page that is not here.”

“What?”

“There’s a page missing. I think it’s the one we want because on the next page is the summoning ritual for Kordak. The one we don’t want.”

“Any idea what happened to the page?”

“Not a clue. Except that it was torn out, it didn’t just get up and walk away.”

“Well, that’s just great.”

“Push comes to shove we could always summon this big fire-breathing dragon here on page 12.”

“Sounds like fun. What does that entail?”

“Nothing much. We just need to get a few candles together and light them all. Then recite a spell.”

“Doesn’t sound too bad. How many candles?”

“About five hundred.”

“Five hundred!?”

“Never said it’d be easy.”

Suddenly, the doorbell rang.

“Who could that be?”

“Wait here. And don’t come where they can see you.”

*BURNING ASH*

“It’s your house.”

Jake left the room again. Cole waited a few seconds then followed after him and stopped at the top of the staircase. He listened as Jake fumbled with the lock and finally opened the door. He heard Jake’s voice followed by a voice he didn’t recognize.

“Yes?” Jake was calm.

“Jake O’Connell?” This voice was gruff.

“Yes? Can I help you, officer?”

“You’re father sent me here to check on you. He thinks this stakeout he’s on is gonna last until sometime tomorrow. Is everything all right?”

“Oh. Yeah, everything’s fine.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, I am.”

“All right. I won’t bother you any longer.”

“Okay. Thanks for coming by.”

Cole heard Jake close the door and lock it. Jake walked back into view and stood at the bottom of the stairs looking up at Cole. A wry grin appeared on Jake’s muzzle. Cole gave the leopard a playful wink then turned and walked back towards the bedroom. As he walked, Cole pulled off his hoodie and his shirt and let them fall to the floor. Jake practically vaulted up the stairs pulling his own shirt off as he went. Jake got to the door of his bedroom and looked in. Cole had moved the book over onto the dresser and was sitting on the bed, shirtless. Jake walked towards the wolf. Cole stood up and grabbed Jake. He pulled him in for a deep, passionate kiss. Jake put his arms around Cole and fell into the kiss. Cole pulled Jake even closer than he already was and looked into his brown feline eyes. Jake stared back but furrowed his brow.

## *BURNING ASH*

“But, what about Dûrfëa?”

“Let him find his own leopard. You’re mine.”

\* \* \*

*ASH* had not slept much the night before. How could he, he had just learned that he had a rare and fatal disease. At about 6:45 AM, Ash decided to give up trying to sleep and got out of bed. He left his room and walked down the hall to get a shower. He did not have to go into work that day. Lilia had called Mr. Weaver and told him that Ash was sick and would not be in. Ash walked into the bathroom and closed the door. He pulled off his shirt and tossed it in the hamper. He stood in front of the mirror and looked himself over from head to toe. Ash frowned at what he saw. There seemed to be less muscle on his bones than he was used to having. Though not entirely sure, Ash thought that his shoulders were also not as broad as before.

“It’s not my body.”

The statement seemed almost absurd, but Ash had been through enough to know that did not mean a thing. If it was not his body, then the only way he could be here is if something else were switched. It seemed a stretch to think that his whole brain had been switched with this world’s Ash. That would not account for the dual sets of memories. Ash mulled this over as he turned on the water to let it warm up. Ash slipped off his underwear and as he straightened up, he suddenly felt lightheaded. He stumbled backwards a little before catching himself on the edge of the sink. His legs were shaking badly. Ash lowered himself to the tiled floor and leaned against the door. He closed his eyes for a few seconds until the dizziness passed. He pulled himself slowly from the floor and stepped into the shower.

## *BURNING ASH*

The warm water felt soothing as it ran over his body and matted his fur. He was content to just stand in the shower and soak for a good long while. This was also the best place Ash knew of where he could go to think without being disturbed. The water calmed his mind as it tumbled over his head and down the rest of his body. Ash took a deep breath and closed his eyes. Until now, he had been actively trying to remember things from the past he had in this world. Now, he was just going to let the memories come to him. He began to notice the water hitting his body less and less. An image grew in his mind. The image was of himself and his mother. He was fifteen. He was lying on the roof of his house staring at the stars. His mother was standing in the attic window talking to him.

There was a low rumbling noise in the distance. Ash sat up and looked. Rolling down the middle of the street, coming from downtown, was a convoy of a military tanks and trucks loaded with soldiers. The tanks stopped rolling forward and waited. They were like large beasts of war just itching to be let loose on the enemy. The trucks stopped as well and disgorged their passengers. The soldiers filed between the tanks and stood ready to fight. They faced down the street towards the open country. Ash turned and looked that way. There was a large mass moving towards the town. When the mob burst onto the street, the streetlamps shed light on the creatures that made up the threat. They were unlike any type of furs Ash had ever seen in his life. Some of them did not even have fur. Ash thought they looked like something out of the nightmares of a kid with an overactive imagination.

The army of monsters stopped when they caught sight of the waiting army of furs. Some of the more grotesque looking creatures snarled at the army, baring their large, yellow, crooked fangs. Some of the soldiers shrank back. One brave soldier, or stupid depending on one's point of view, stepped out from the rest and aimed a shoulder-mounted rocket launcher at the rabble.



## *BURNING ASH*

There was a click and then the rocket shot out of the tube and flew towards the monsters. A large monster moved forward and swallowed the rocket whole as it approached. There was a muffled boom and smoke escaped from the monster's clenched jaws. The monster grinned then charged towards the army. The massive army of monsters charged with the first creature. As the enemy army approached, the tanks opened fire.

The space separating the two armies was suddenly swallowed up in plumes of red and orange flames. Ash watched from the roof of his house as the monsters tore through the flames and into the waiting army of furs. Balls of bright red energy soared through the air towards the furs. The blast turned into a wave of energy as it neared the army. The blast incinerated five furs at once. Ash and his mother watched the battle roar on for hours. The sun was starting to rise over the distant mountains and it was looking as though the furs would lose the battle. Lilia pleaded with her son to come back inside. When Ash stood up, one of the creatures on the ground saw him. Ash froze in fear. The creature was ten feet from him when it disappeared in a bright blue flash. Something covered in blue flames flashed over Ash's head and down towards the two armies. Another flashed overhead, this one engulfed in red flames.

Ash watched the two newcomers. They immediately began wearing away at the army of monsters. Ash watched them in wonder. The one in blue flames was a fox. He was covered head to toe in golden fur and had two large wings with golden feathers. Nine tails whipped and writhed against one another behind the fox. He wore armor of burning blue energy and carried a sword made entirely of blue fire. The other was also a fox, though this one's fur was a dark shade of grey. This fox had eight swirling tails and his wings were covered in a thin layer of dark leather. He had armor of flaming red and a sword of orange flames. Together, the two winged foxes decimated the army of monsters. As he watched, the golden fox turned and looked

## *BURNING ASH*

up at Ash. The fox smiled then turned back to his work. The grey fox lifted his nose skyward and sniffed.

“More on the way, brother!” The fox’s voice was deep and powerful.

The two foxes turned and looked towards the rising sun. Ash looked that way as well and saw a large number of massive black shapes swarming towards them. As they came closer, the dark shapes resolved into large, black-scaled dragons. The foxes kicked off from the ground and flew to meet the oncoming monsters. Ash watched the two foxes weaving around the dragons and slashing at them with their swords. One of the dragons wheeled in the air and began to drop. There was a loud thud as the dragon’s carcass hit the ground below it. There came a few light thuds behind Ash on the roof. He turned around, but did not see what had attacked him. The next thing he knew, Ash was no longer standing on the roof, but soaring through the air. He hit the ground and rolled a few feet. He heard his mother scream then he lost consciousness. When he opened his eyes, his mother was lying on the ground looking at him. The only problem was that Ash was looking at his mother’s back.

Her head had been bent backwards and her throat torn out. A low growl came from somewhere down towards Ash’s hindpaws. He sat up and looked. A rather gangly creature sat huddled on the ground. Blood covered the creature’s arms, some dripped from the corners of its mouth. Ash tried not to make a sound but the creature noticed him and rose to its clawed feet. The creature must have been at least ten feet tall, though it was hunched over a great deal, it could have been taller. Ash rose and tried to run away as the monster lumbered toward him. He was stopped by another monster that had stepped in his way. This monster was not as tall as the other, but its limbs and torso were a good bit larger. Ash took a step back from the large beast before him. A large clawed hand seized him from behind. Ash let out a strangled yelp.

## *BURNING ASH*

The hand lifted Ash from the ground and dangled him in the air before the opening jaws of the other creature. The beast took a step closer, slime and blood dripped from his long teeth. Ash lashed out with his hindpaws and kicked the monster in the chest numerous times. The kicks did not seem to phase the beast at all through his large muscled torso. The creature was annoyed, however, and seized Ash's leg on the next kick. With little to no effort, the large hand snapped the bones in his leg. Ash cried out again. This time his calls were answered. A seam appeared on the beast, running from his left shoulder to his right thigh. Blue flames spread away from the seam as the creature burned away. The golden fox stood on the other side. The thing clutching his neck gave a choked scream and Ash fell to the ground. When his hindpaws hit the ground, pain shot up his broken leg and sent him tumbling forward.

Ash rolled over and looked up at the creature. It was when he saw the stump of the beast's arm that he realized he could still feel the grip on his neck. The grey fox pulled his sword back and swung again, this time he caught the creature in the back of the neck severing his head. The grey fox straightened and walked over to Ash. Stooping, he removed the clawed hand from around his neck and tossed it onto the monster's corpse. The fox moved to heal his leg, but Ash turned and crawled frantically towards his mother's body. The gold fox was at her before Ash made it. Ash looked into the fox's glowing blue eyes. There was warmth and comfort in those eyes. Kneeling, the fox touched Ash's mother's neck.

There was a small flash of light. The fox reached around and placed a finger gingerly on her muzzle. Gently, he turned her head back around so that it faced forward. Ash cringed at the soft cracking sounds coming from her neck. The gold fox stood and held out a paw. To Ash's surprise, his mother sat up and took the paw. The fox lifted her to her hindpaws and steadied

## *BURNING ASH*

her. Something brushed against Ash's leg. He jerked his head around and saw the grey fox kneeling beside him.

"You're a slippery little fox, you know that?" His voice was still powerful, but also strangely soothing.

Ash looked down at his leg and noticed that it did not hurt any longer. The grey fox helped Ash up. Ash rushed to his mother. She put her arms around her son and squeezed him softly. The golden fox touched her shoulder then turned and walked away. The grey fox clapped a paw on the back of Ash's neck. Ash thought he felt a prick on the back of his neck, but the feeling faded, as he suddenly felt very cold. He was shaking. As he started to feel colder and colder, Ash also felt his fur heavy with water. In the back of his mind, Ash heard a repetitive banging sound and somefur calling his name. The voice became louder. It was Cameron's voice. Then Ash realized that he was indeed soaking wet and water was still pelting his fur. A loud crashing sound brought him back to the present in a second. Ash was lying crumpled in one corner of the shower with freezing cold water rained down on him. The curtain of the shower was pulled back and Cameron stood there. In no time, Cameron had turned off the water and pulled Ash from the shower.

Ash lay shivering on the tiled floor. He could not feel his arms or legs at all. Cameron yelled for Lilia, who came running with two more towels. Cameron and Lilia wrapped Ash in the towels and dried him off the best they could. Cameron stood and left the bathroom. Lilia held her son in her arms and whispered comfort in his ears. Cameron returned with a heavy blanket that he put across Ash's shoulders. Lilia stood and helped Ash to his hindpaws. The three of them walked out of the bathroom and carefully walked back to Ash's room. Lilia left and went downstairs. Cameron helped Ash into a pair of sweatpants and a long-sleeve shirt.

## *BURNING ASH*

Once dressed, Ash walked down the stairs with Cameron right behind him and the blanket still wrapped around him. Ash entered the living room and saw his mother walking in from the kitchen. She carried a tray with a pot of hot coffee and three mugs on it. Ash sat down on the couch, a heater beside him on high.

Ash glanced up at the clock on the mantle. 8:25 AM. Ash had been unconscious in the shower for almost two hours. Any longer and he might have frozen to death. *Perhaps I'd be better off.* If he had not had been too cold to move, Ash would have kicked himself for thinking that. Cameron sat down in one of the chairs and rested his elbows on his knees. Lilia lowered herself onto the couch beside her son. She hugged him tightly. The image of her lying on the ground with her head turned the wrong way flashed before his eyes. Ash shut his eyes to push the image away. He reached up and touched his mother's arm. Cameron asked Ash if he knew what had happened. Ash told them everything. The memories he had gone back to seemed to have kept him from realizing how dizzy he was. He had not even noticed something was wrong until he had felt the prick on his neck. He asked his mother if she remembered anything about that. Surprisingly, she had. Of all the things that happened that day, one of them was that they found out Ash was allergic to bees. *Allergic to bees?*

A knock came at the door. Cameron rose from his chair and walked to the door. Ash heard the door open and Cameron's voice as he greeted whoever was on the other side. Cameron walked back into the room followed by three furs. An otter and two raccoons. Ash furrowed his brow as he looked at the three of them. The last time he had seen them, they were accusing him of murder. *Now what did they want?* Detective Sean Browning flashed his badge and introduced the two forensic scientists. CSI Price took a seat in one of the two chairs in the living room. Dan Browning remained standing, but he sat the metal case in his paw on the floor beside

## *BURNING ASH*

him. Detective Browning stood with his paws in his pants pockets. Ash looked from the two raccoons to Jacqueline Price sitting near to Lilia. Jacqueline gave him a little half smile. Ash did not return the smile but continued to stare at her. She cleared her throat.

“We took the DNA sample you gave us and compared it to the samples we took from Ms. Christensen’s body.” She paused and smiled again. “The samples weren’t a perfect match to yours. So, your off the hook.”

“What do you mean, ‘not a perfect match’?” Cameron voiced the confusion Ash felt.

“The tests showed that the donor was a close relative of yours, Mr. Reynolds.” Dan Browning’s voice startled Ash.

Detective Browning stepped forward and pulled a piece of paper from his coat. “This is a warrant for the arrest of Micah Reynolds. He’ll be coming with us.”

Ash glared up at the detective. Neither Lilia nor Cameron said anything to the three furs that had walked into their house flashing badges and warrants.

Jacqueline leaned in. “Ash, this would be really easy if you just cooperated and told us where your brother is.”

“Fine.”

“Ash.” His mother’s voice was hushed and cautioning.

“No, I’ll tell her.”

“Thank you, Mr. Reynolds.”

“You wanna see my brother, he’s at the cemetery. You wanna talk to him, you’re gonna need a Quija board or something.”

“Excuse me?” CSI Price almost fell out of her chair.

“He’s dead! He has been for seven years!”

*BURNING ASH*

“I’m sorry. We didn’t know.”

“Oh, so you took the time to verify that I was the only male red fox on my floor, but not to check that my brother’s dead? That’s fucked up, you know that?”

“Mr. Reynolds...” Dan started but did not get a chance to finish.

Ash jumped to his hindpaws. “No, you listen. I could take being accused for a murder I didn’t commit and being given the third degree. But, you come in here and accuse my brother of a murder he couldn’t, and wouldn’t, commit in a million years.”

“Ash.” Cameron started to rise from his chair.

“Get out!”

The three furs started walking towards the door. The detective exchanged a glance with the two criminalist. The raccoon held back to ask one last question.

“Is it at all possible that your brother isn’t actually dead?”

“Fuck you.”

The otter called from the entrance hall and the raccoon darted out. Ash suddenly felt lightheaded. He fell back onto the couch. Lilia looked at her son’s face and shivered. There was sweat rolling though the fur on his face. The mere exertion from yelling seemed to have drained him of his strength. Stranger yet was the fact that, though he was sweating, Ash was still shaking from bring cold. Cameron got up from his chair again to go lock the door. When he returned, Ash was coughing. He sounded as if he would die in the next few minutes. Cameron and Lilia both hoped that would not come to pass. Lilia especially. She had already had to bury her husband and her youngest son. Ash was all she had left. And now, it looked as if she may lose him to this disease.

“Ash?” She touched him gently on the shoulder.

## BURNING ASH

“What?” His voice was calm, but strained.

“You have a gathering tonight. I don’t really want you to go in your state, but you’ve missed two gatherings so far. Any more, and...”

Tears had come into her eyes. Ash turned and hugged her. He whispered into her ear.

“I’ll be careful. I can call somefur to come pick me up.”

“Okay. That’s a good idea.”

“Who’re you gonna call?” Cameron’s voice startle Ash. He had not seen him return.

“I don’t know. Harry or Bianca, I guess. One of the two.”

\* \* \*

*ASH* sat in the passenger seat and fidgeted with the pendant on his collar, as Bianca drove the two of them downtown for the meeting. Ash noticed that she was glancing over at him every few seconds. Ash was beginning to wonder if there was something she wanted to tell him, or if she had started to suspect a change in him. She eased the car to a stop at the next red light and turned to face Ash. He looked at her.

“Are you feeling okay?” There was love and caring in her voice.

“I’m fine. Light’s green.” Ash hoped that would be the end of it.

He was wrong.

“You sure? You look terrible. Are you sure you wanna go to tonight’s gathering?”

“Yes, I am. I’ve missed two already. If I miss tonight’s, that’s three. And, you know what happens then.”



## BURNING ASH

Ash did not actually know, but was wondering if Bianca would betray what would happen. And, she did. Solemnly, Bianca drew a finger across her throat in a slicing motion. *I was afraid of that.* Ash looked out the passenger-side window. Neither of them talked the rest of the drive. When they arrived at the tower, they entered and took an elevator up to the twentieth floor. Once there, Ash and Bianca parted ways to go change for the gathering. Ash walked with his head down. He knew that the demon Kordak was the leader of this cult Ash found himself a part of. However, he had not been able to nail down any image of what the demon looked like. Ash had a feeling, though, that he would not like what he saw. When he got to the changing area, he found Harry sitting on a bench wearing the customary brown robe. His paws were draped between his knees and his head was bowed.

Ash walked over and opened the locker next to Harry's. A similar brown robe hung on a hook. Ash's robe, however, had gold embroidering around the edges of the robe and at the end of the sleeves. The sash that was used as a belt was also made of a golden fabric. Though he did not let it show, Ash was very confused by the golden embellishments on the robe and sash. He put on the robe then sat down next to Harry. Harry had not seemed to notice that Ash had walked in front of him, let alone Ash sitting down beside him. Ash looked at Harry for a minute then turned his attention to his shoes. No shoes were allowed on the Gathering Hall floor. Yet another piece of information that was potentially harmless, but also not particularly useful at the moment. Ash tossed his shoes and socks into the locker and pushed the door closed. Ash turned to say something casual to Harry when he saw for the first time that there were tears running down his cheeks.

"Harry? What's wrong?" Ash lowered himself onto the bench beside the jackal.

"I miss Julie." His voice cracked as he spoke.

*BURNING ASH*

“I do to, Harry. I do to.” Ash did not know what else to say.

“Did the police tell you anything when they spoke to you yesterday? Do they have any leads?”

Ash looked away from Harry for a few seconds. Harry was studying Ash’s face.

“They did have some evidence they found on her body.”

“What was it?” Harry’s eyes had lit up.

“Hairs and DNA. They wanted to talk to me because the evidence showed that a male red fox had killed her and...”

“You’re the only male red fox on the floor.”

“I didn’t kill her.” Ash said it before Harry had a chance to think it. “I gave them DNA and that proved it.”

“So they still don’t know who did it?”

“Well, that’s where it gets a little strange.”

“How so?”

“When they compared my DNA to the samples from Julie’s body they found that there was a similarity between the two.”

“You’re related to the murderer? That is kinda strange.”

“That’s not the part that’s strange. The DNA sample belonged to my brother, Micah.”

“But...?”

“Yeah. Told you it was strange.”

“I’m sorry I thought you could have killed her. You have known her longer than me.”

“C’mon, let’s go. We don’t want to be late.”

## *BURNING ASH*

The two of them rose from the bench and walked back to the elevator to go up to the Gathering Hall. Ash watched the digital screen count up three floors until they reached the twenty-fourth floor. As the doors opened, Ash suddenly got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. About forty, or so, other furs were standing about talking in small groups. Ash saw Bianca and started walking towards her with Harry following a couple steps behind him. Bianca's robe had similar embellishments as Ash's, but in silver and not gold. A large lizard was standing next to her. He was saying something and it looked to Ash that Bianca did not much care for what it was. When Bianca caught sight of Ash, she pushed past the reptile and practically bounced towards him. The lizard turned and glared at Ash. Ash saw that the lizard was in fact an extremely well built komodo dragon. There was fire in his eyes.

“What was that all about?” Ash tried to keep his voice casual. It was surprisingly easy.

“Oh, you know Kellen. Always trying to get what you have.”

“Oh, is that all?” *Kellen*, the name stuck out in Ash's mind.

The lights in the room dimmed. This was the signal to gather around the center where Kordak would show up at some point. Ash was actually looking forward to seeing him. Harry, on the other paw, did not seem as thrilled with the idea as he could have been. As the chatting began to die down during the wait, Ash glanced around and caught Kellen's eyes once again. He suddenly realized why the name had sounded so familiar. Ash had not given much thought to the vampires he had met in the world of the humans. There, Kellen was the name of Bianca's second-in-command. The first of the vampires to die that night. Ash was brought back to the present by the sounds of an elevator coming from the center of the room. Ash watched with the others as a section of the floor lifted out of place and drifted up to the ceiling. A platform rose

## BURNING ASH

up to settle in the hole now in the middle of the floor. On this platform, there was a fur that was even larger than Kellen was.

The fur was well over seven feet tall and had to have been at least three feet wide at the shoulders. He was covered head to toe in grey-brown fur and had two large and leathery wings attached to his back. They stretched out to their full span then folded back in. His face had features of both a fox and a bear. His muzzle was short and broad and his ears were tall and ended in tufts of black fur. The hair on the top of his head had been grown out and hung in a long braid down his back. Eight tails dragged the floor behind the fur. Ash thought that they looked out of place with the rest of the fur. The tails were neither canine nor ursine in nature, but more feline. The tails were long and thin and ended in tufts of black fur. Ash knew whom this was that stood before them. It was indeed Bryan Mayer after being bonded with Kordak. *But, that doesn't explain the tails*, Ash pondered for a moment. It also seemed that Bryan was glad to see all the furs gather around him.

“I'm glad to see that you are all safe and well.”

He sounded more sincere than anyfur Ash had ever spoken with. *This can't be the Bryan that I know*, Ash was puzzled by this behavior. Ash suddenly realized that the Bryan from his world must have sent him here to get rid of him. Bryan must have felt the idea of a version of himself that was kind and loving would rile Ash. Ash actually found the idea rather amusing. It gave him one less thing to worry about. Bryan raised his paws and all the furs bowed their heads out of respect. When Ash straightened up, Bryan was looking right at him. The large bear-fox hybrid gave Ash a warm smile one would expect from a father. Ash returned the smile almost before he knew what he was doing. The fur turned away and looked around at the other faces

*BURNING ASH*

looking at him. He gave them the same caring smile and each returned it. That is, until, he reached Harry. Harry bowed his head and Bryan seemed a little disappointed in him.

“The prevalent belief today is that confession is good for the soul. One among you wishes to make a confession, do you not?”

He waited. Harry stepped forward.

“I wish to confess something, Lord Brydak.” *Brydak?*

“First let me offer my condolences on the tragic event of this past weekend. Now, what is it that you wish to confess, my son?”

“Julie and I were thinking of settling down and starting a family.”

“That’s not much of a crime.”

“We were mulling over the idea of leaving the cult and joining one of the angel churches.” There were quick intakes of breathes from around the room. “We... we had gone to one of the convocations they hold once a week. I’m sorry.”

“I forgive you this transgression, but I cannot ignore the rules. The rules state very clearly that once one of you makes official your induction into this group that you can not and will not ever turn your backs on your cult members and myself. And, what is the penalty for breaking this rule?”

“Death.” The answer startled Ash, but not so much as the fact that everyfur present said it simultaneously.

Harry walked forward and bowed in front of Brydak then lowered himself to his knees.

“I understand and accept my fate.” Harry was so calm it was scaring Ash.

“I wish you the best on the other side. May you be reunited with Julie in the Afterlife.”

“Thank you, my Lord.”

## *BURNING ASH*

Brydak raised one paw and held it over Harry's lowered ears. There was a small discharge of orange light from Brydak's palm. Harry's body went rigid for a moment then collapsed to the ground. His eyes were looking straight back at Ash and there was no life in them at all. There was no sound in the room. Ash's eyes suddenly blurred then cleared. His head was swimming as he tried to sort through what had just happened. He was stunned by the fact that no fur was speaking, or even so much as whispering amongst themselves or a gasp. Ash looked at Brydak and saw his mouth moving, but heard no words. He also noticed that everyfur was staring at him. His vision blurred again. He tried blinking to clear it but never got the chance. Brydak and the rest of the room and its occupants vanished from his sight as he lost consciousness and slumped to the floor.

Ash woke up sometime later staring at a rather sterile looking white ceiling. His head rested on a comfortably fluffy pillow. He heard a noise come from down towards the end of the bed. The sound was soft, like somefur breathing lightly as they slept. Ash raised up on his elbows to look at who had made the sound. It was Bianca. She was sleeping peacefully. Her long rabbit ears hung down over her black hair. Ash wondered how long she had been sitting there watching over him. He sat up more and looked around the room. It was completely alien to him except for a feeling in the back of his mind. The feeling was very prominent when he touched the bed with his paws. Ash placed his paw flat on the bed and closed his eyes. Images began to drift into the front of his mind. He saw Bianca as if he were looking at her with his own eyes. She smiled up at him. He could see his paws pressed firmly against the bed on either side of her head. He was lying on top of her. They were...

Ash opened his eyes suddenly. Bianca stirred, her eyes fluttering open as she did. Bianca sat up in her chair and smiled at Ash. Ash smiled back, but without the same enthusiasm.

## BURNING ASH

There was a click from the door as somefur turned the knob and pushed the door opened. Brydak walked in and closed the door behind him. He walked over and stood beside Bianca, smiling at Ash. Nothing was betrayed. If this was the Bryan and Kordak combination he knew then he could have easily killed him in his sleep. That meant that his Bryan and Kordak were still in his world. *They could have killed all my furiends and family by now*, Ash found the thought difficult to push out of his mind. Ash needed to get home. His thoughts suddenly jumped to Cassie and Cole and any of his other furiends that were unaffected. He needed to get them home. Even if he did not make it, Cassie might have the power to destroy Kordak forever.

*Calleigh.* Ash had to fight hard to keep back the tears. He missed her so much it made his chest ache. Bianca touched his shoulder, bringing him back to the now. There was a question burning in her eyes that she desperately wanted to ask, but seemed not to want to do so in front of Brydak. Brydak rested a heavy, but caring paw on Bianca's shoulder as a signal to give him a moment with Ash. Bianca rose from her chair and went to the door. Before she opened the door, Bianca looked back at Ash. He smiled at her. That seemed to reassure her of something and she left, smiling to herself. Brydak pulled the chair closer to the head of the bed and sat down. He seemed worried. *But, what could he be worried about?* Ash was puzzled. Could Brydak be sincerely worried about Ash? Ash decided that he would wait and see. Brydak took a breath before he spoke.

"Is everything all right, Ash?" The amount of kindness and sincere worry in his words startled Ash.

"No." *Might as well tell him the truth.* "I was almost hit by a car in Furrtown."

"When?"

*BURNING ASH*

“Last Saturday at about one in the morning.” Brydak looked like he wanted to say something, but did not interrupt. “I sprained my ankle and hit my head when I fell off my bike. The doctor at Furrtown Medical took a blood sample for testing.”

Ash paused for a moment.

“Go on, Ash.”

“The doc called Monday with the results from the tests. That’s why I missed the gatherings those two days.”

“I believe I may just dismiss that and give you a second chance. Please, continue.”

“I’m dying.”

“What!?”

“Yes, my Lord. I have a fatal disease. That’s why I collapsed back at the gathering. And, on top of that, I was a suspect in Julie’s murder and now my dead brother is the primary suspect. My life is so totally fucked up right now. Sorry.”

“You have every right to be upset. To be near death and to have the death of your brother brought back like this is too much for one fur to bare. If there is anything I can do, ask and I will do it.”

“Actually, there is one thing.”

*END PART I*