

# BURNING ASH

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## PART 2

*JAKE* stood across the street from the Church of Dûrfëa. It was the last place he should have been considering that Dûrfëa had an assassin after him for his choice of mate. But, it was also the one place he needed to be because the only other book with the Un bonding ritual was inside the church.

“Please, God, don’t let me fuck this up.”

Jake pulled his hood up over his head as he crossed the street. He made sure the hood was low enough to obscure his face. He pushed the door open and stepped in. The building was quiet. *Too quiet*, Jake was nervous. There was not even one guard at the door. The church, as it was called, was far from any church Jake had ever been to. It was for all intents and purposes an office building. Albeit a small office building with only about twelve floors. The topmost floor held a large chamber that the convocations were held in. That was where Jake would probably find the book. But, he was not sure so he would have to check each floor room by room. Cole had wanted come with him, but Jake would not let him. Cole was probably going to get into enough trouble for not killing him when he was supposed to. Jake did not want Cole to die for trying to steal a book from his angel. Jake searched the first floor but found nothing but janitorial closets and potted plants.

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Jake walked back to the main entry way and stood in front of the elevators. His eyes drifted up slowly as he caught sight of a huge cross hanging on the wall over the elevators. The cross itself was made of solid gold and had a large snake twined around it. Two golden wings spread away the cross and a crown was hung above it all. Jake stood and marveled at it for a moment or two then he crossed to the elevators and pushed the button.

“How the hell did I miss that when I first came in?”

Jake waited for the elevator patiently. He rested his paws on the two guns strapped to his hips. He was hoping he would not have to use them on anyfur. Because he always liked to be prepared, Jake had put extra ammunition in the satchel he now wore on his back. The elevator doors opened without a sound. Jake stepped in and pressed the button for the top floor of the church. He figured that if the book was not there then he could check the other floors on his way out. The trip up was quiet but took longer than Jake had hoped it would. The elevator stopped at the top and the doors parted. The entire top floor was devoid of any furniture except for a large altar at the front of the room. Jake walked to the altar. He was cautious as he crossed the wide empty room. There did not seem to be any cameras in the room, but Jake kept the hood up just in case there was a camera hidden somewhere.

Jake examined the altar. There was a large silken cloth draped over the mahogany that made up the altar. The cloth was made of blood red silk with gold edges. Sewn into the cloth was the same symbol that hung over the elevators. Jake looked at the cloth with indifference for a few moments before grabbing it and throwing it to the floor. *Take that you bigot.* Jake walked around behind the altar and began running his paws along the wood frame. He started knocking on the wood with his knuckles. He was wondering if the book was hidden inside in some sort of secret compartment. *I watch too many old movies,* Jake chuckled to himself as he continued

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banging on the altar. He moved from the backside to the top of the altar. He started at one end and went to the other. He was at the exact center of the altar when the dull thudding of his knuckles revealed a hollow portion of the altar. Jake looked for hinges and a latch but there was none. He stepped back and thought a moment.

Trying the first thing that popped in his head, Jake put his paws around the area where the altar was hollow. He hoped that there would be no alarm and pressed on the altar. There was a click and whoosh of air. Jake stepped back quickly. A square section of the altar top rose away from the rest. When it stopped, the section of mahogany was supported by four metal rods. There was an old book sitting on a stand in the center of the newly revealed hiding place. Jake grinned and stepped forward, reaching out with his paw. He froze, his paw mere inches away from the book. Was there an alarm that would sound? Would hundreds of security guards appear out of nowhere and grab him? Could there be a booby trap? Would the entire altar explode if he moved the book? Jake frowned at himself.

“You’re an idiot. Just grab the book and quit worrying.”

Jake snatched the book from the stand and stuffed it in the bag he had brought. So far, so good. There was no alarm, no security guards and definitely no exploding altars. He slipped the bag onto his back and headed back for the elevator. Jake pressed the button and waited. A thought suddenly popped in his head. He pulled the book from the bag and opened it. What if the book did not have the ritual in it after all? *I’d have to hurt somefur at that point*, Jake thumbed through the pages. The elevator doors opened and he stepped in. He turned the old pages with care as the doors slid closed and the elevator started down. After only a few minutes the elevator stopped. Jake looked up, thinking that the trip up had taken longer than that. The elevator had stopped on the eighth floor. Jake groaned. There must have been a silent alarm that

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had alerted the security team, or the police. Jake put the book back and rested his paws on the guns, still hoping he would not have to use them. Jake looked up at the ceiling and got an idea.

He jumped up and knocked away the service panel and climbed out on top of the elevator. He figured he leave the elevator and try to get up to the ninth floor. Just as he was out of the elevator, Jake heard the doors open and the voices of a couple security guards as they yelled into their radios. Jake smirked as he began forcing the ninth floor doors open. The doors parted rather easily and revealed a pair of freshly shined shoes and dark brown slacks. He also saw the tail that belonged to the fur whom more than likely had a gun trained on him. The tail was long and feline. It was also covered in golden fur and black spots. A leopard. *Dad!* Jake decided not to lift his head. Instead he turned and jumped back into the elevator. He landed on one of the guards inside and rolled out the doors before they closed. Jake shot to his hindpaws and took off down the hall. The elevators would probably no longer be an option for escape. As he ran, Jake tapped on the radio he had in his ear.

“Yo! I have a slight problem. There must have been an alarm, or something. Cops and security guards are crawling all over the place. I think a lot of them are on the ninth floor. I’m on the eighth. Ten? Okay, I’ll try. See you in a bit.”

Jake tapped off the radio and ran for the nearest set of stairs. He sprinted up the stairs, but he was cut off when he reached the ninth floor. The door flew open and his father stepped through flanked by six uniformed officers. Jake swore and pulled the guns from their holsters. He aimed them and pulled the triggers three times each. Six tranquilizer darts shot from the barrels and took down the officers. Only his father remained and he really did not want to shoot him, even if it was just a small dart. He had to get out of that stairwell. He replaced one of the guns in its holster and reached into a pouch on the back of his belt. *Sorry about this dad,* Jake

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pulled out a small metal ball and hurled it at his father. The ball hit the unsuspecting leopard in the head and sent him reeling to the ground. Jake launched himself up the steps and over his father's writhing body. He took the steps two at a time leading up to the tenth floor. There were several loud explosive sounds as his father tried to shoot him as he ran up the stairs. He could make this easier by revealing himself, but then his father might shoot him anyway for leaving the house and breaking into a church.

Jake ducked through the door as bullets continued sizzling past his head and ricocheting off the walls and railings. He never heard the door close behind him. Instead, the sound of the door banging hard against the wall echoed down the hall to his ears. Jake could see a large window at the end of the hall. He had been hanging around outside long enough before entering to know that there should have been a fire escape on the neighboring building that was level with that window. *Looks like I'm going through.* Jake ran harder. He heard two more gunshots. One bullet was too far left and hit the wall sending chunks flying out at him. The other bullet, however, ripped through his right shoulder, causing him to stumble a little. Jake tried not to slow down, but at his current speed he might not be able to break through the window and still make it to the fire escape across the way. He reached into the pouch on his back with his left paw and drew out another metal ball. Pulling back, he pitched the ball at the window.

Jake jumped through the shower of broken glass and soared through the air. He slammed hard against the railing of the fire escape. He tried hoisting himself over, but the strain it put on his shoulder made the blood come faster. Jake fell over the rail and landed flat on his back. More gunshots rang out from the busted window. Jake rolled over and fell down the ladder and onto the next balcony down. A voice cried in his ear.

<No, you idiot! You need to be going up!>

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“This is a tad harder than it looks, y’know!”

<Just get moving. I’ll be ready for you.>

Jake grimaced as he rose to his hindpaws and started up the ladder. It was slow going as he had to climb the ladders with only one arm in a prime condition. The other was practically useless from the pain. He had gone up three more balconies when he saw a rope hanging down the side of the building. Jake grumbled as he realized he would have to jump to grab the rope and that he would have to grab it with both paws. He did not relish the thought, but he also knew that there was no other way. A good number of the rungs on the ladder leading up to the next level had rusted away into nothingness. Jake hopped up onto the railing and braced himself for the jump and the inevitable pain. He jumped and seized the rope with his paws. His paws slipped and he started to slide down the rope. When he caught himself, the suddenness of the stop nearly jerked his arms out of their sockets. His right arm, though, was already half way there. The pain was excruciating. He could feel the blood running down his back and chest.

There was a tug on the rope from somewhere above him. Jake looked up and saw the silhouetted figure of his savior. He started climbing up the rope. It was hard work because of his arm. If he had not have been shot, Jake could have climbed to the top by now. He made his life simpler by placing his hindpaws against the building and essentially walking up the side of the wall. The majority of the weight was still on his arms, though. He reached the edge of the roof and threw one arm over the edge. A paw wrapped around his wrist while another came over the edge and seized a clump of his shirt. The owner of these paws helped pull Jake over and onto the roof. Jake rolled onto his back and promptly began to bleed all over the roofing. A voice came out of the darkness.

“Get up. You’re making a mess.”

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“Bite me.”

“Looks like somefur already has.”

Cassie knelt down by his side and looked at his wound. The bullet had gone clean through his shoulder. Cassie determined that the bullet had cracked his shoulder blade. That was what was causing all the pain. The cracked bone was digging into his muscles each time he moved his arm. Cassie now regretted not having her bracelets. With those, she could have healed Jake’s shoulder in a heartbeat. Unfortunately, though, she had forgotten them at her house. She was in for it with her father enough as it was for being out this late. If she had used her bracelets and he had found out, there would have been hell to pay. Jake reached over and poked Cassie on the arm. She had drifted into her own little world and stopped noticing that he was bleeding to death. Cassie snapped back. She got up and walked to Jake’s left side. She put her arm under his and pulled him up. What little moonlight there was, fell across the two of them and gleamed off the blood running down the front of Jake’s clothes.

“C’mon. Let’s get you home. I can run home and grab my bracelets and be back at your house to heal you shoulder before anyfur has to find out what happened.”

“Let’s just get out of here first. We can worry about my shoulder once we’re out of danger.”

Jake and Cassie made their way as quietly as possible to the ground floor of the build they were in. They could see the police cars parked in front of the church. The darkness around them was filled with probing blue and red beams as the light on the police cruisers swiveled in there glass coverings. Fortunately for the two of them, Jake had suggested that they park their getaway car a few blocks over. They left the building through a side entrance and walked down the alley away from the crowded street. They turned and walked behind two more buildings

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before turning down another alley headed towards the waiting car. They got to the car and Jake started towards the driver's side door. Cassie stopped him and ushered him into the passenger seat. She climbed in behind the wheel and turned the car on. Careful not to draw any undue attention to them, Cassie pulled the car out into the street and started back towards Jake's house. She looked over at Jake. His head was back and his eyes were closed. Cassie's heart began to pound harder.

"Don't die on me, Jake!"

The sound of her voice brought him back. Jake opened his eyes, but he was too weak to raise his head. He let out a little moan of pain to tell Cassie he was awake. Jake heard a sigh of relief come from the driver's side of the car. Cassie glanced over at Jake again just as the car passed under a streetlamp. The light revealed blood running from the corners of Jake's mouth and down his neck. Cassie pressed the gas a little harder. After a few long minutes, she was pulling the car into the driveway at Jake's house. She got out of the car and ran around to the passenger side and pulled Jake from the car. As quickly as possible, she got Jake up to the front door and into the house. Cassie struggled to get him upstairs and into one of the bathrooms. Carefully, she removed his clothes and helped him into the tub. Jake had closed his eyes again. Frowning at the unconscious leopard, Cassie reached over and turned the water on. Freezing cold water shot from the showerhead and began pelting Jake. His eyes were opened in a flash.

"What the hell?"

"Calm down!"

"Why's the water so cold?"

"If I turned the water on hot, the heat would cause your blood to thin and your heart to pump faster. In other words, you'd bleed to death faster."



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“Cold water’s fine.”

Cassie smiled. “Okay, can you wash yourself off?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“I’ll go find some bandages and a change of clothes for you.”

Cassie left the bathroom. Jake went to reach for the soap with his right paw, but stopped. Instead he grabbed the soap with his left and began washing the blood from his fur. The water was very cold, but he had gotten used to it for the time being. He was careful not to get too close to the bullet hole for fear of making it start bleeding more profusely. Jake concentrated on cleaning the dried blood from around the bullet hole. As he washed the wound, Jake’s mind traveled back to that hallway. His father had shot him. He was not sure if his father had known it was his own son, but Jake knew his father was not an idiot. Jake had not concealed his tail. Any of the furs in that building would have been able to identify the intruder as a leopard. Jake figured that it would only be a matter of time before his father showed up to question him. The only thing Jake was not sure of was if Victor would show up as his father, or as a detective.

The bathroom door opened and Cassie walked back in with a stack of clothes. She set them on the counter and moved closer to the bathtub. Jake smiled up at her. A towel hit him right in the face as he beamed up at Cassie. She struggled a little as she helped Jake out of the tub. He was bigger than she was and she was also trying to be careful. Jake managed to get himself dressed, but before he put on his shirt, Cassie wrapped the bandages she had brought around the bullet wound. She helped Jake on with his shirt. Jake and Cassie walked back downstairs. Jake went into the kitchen to get a couple of aspirin for the pain in his shoulder. Jake walked back into the entrance hall where he had left Cassie. She had pulled the book from the satchel and was flipping through the old pages. Jake walked up behind her and looked over

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her shoulder. He read the header of the page to himself. *Communing with a Loved One Lost*. Cassie realized Jake was looking and shut the book and placed it on the small table in front of her.

“Cass?” Jake touched her lightly on her shoulder.

“What?”

“You okay?”

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“You were looking at a ritual for talking to the dead. How is this a good sign?”

“Your shoulder feeling any better?”

“You’re changing the subject, but yes, it is.”

Cassie turned and threw her arms around Jake’s waist. She buried her face in his shirt. Jake was a little taken aback by this, but put his arms around her shoulders. She was trembling and she had started to cry.

“Hey. Hey. What’s the matter?”

“I miss Micah. I’m afraid I might not see him again.”

“I know how you feel, Cass.”

“How? Cole’s here. And, you still have your father.”

“He shot me.”

“Okay, bad example, but there’s still Cole.”

“Yeah, and you still have me, Cole and don’t forget Ash. He may be in another city but he’s still our Ash.”

“You see, this is why I love you.”

“Love me?”

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“You’re like the brother I never had. Or, wanted.”

“Hey, hold on!”

“I’m just messing with you. I’m gonna run home and grab my bracelets. Be back after a while.”

Cassie opened the door and walked out across the yard. Jake watched after her until she was across the street and heading off into darkness. Jake closed the door and turned to look at the book on the table. He picked it up and walked back to the kitchen. He fixed a cup of coffee and sat down to read through the Un summoning ritual.

\* \* \*

*RINGING* erupted from some point off in the darkness. Cole jolted up in his bed. He looked at his clock and saw that he had only been asleep for a little less than half an hour. He reached for his cell phone but could not find it. Cole fumbled with the knob on the lamp. The light slit the darkness and put spots in Cole’s eyes.

“Fuck.”

Cole looked around, blinking constantly. His phone kept ringing. He found it lying on the bed only about a foot from where his head had been. Cole grumbled to himself as he lifted the phone and flipped it open. He put the phone to his ear and tried to push the annoyance from his voice.

“Hello.”

‘Sorry to disturb you, Mr. Sommers, but Lord Dûrfëa requests your presence at the church immediately.’ The voice was calm and controlled.

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*Too calm.* “Of course, I’ll be right there.”

Cole closed the phone and climbed out of bed. He put on some clothes and left his room. He stopped by Calleigh’s room to look in on her. She was sound asleep. Cole walked down the stairs and grabbed his car keys from the coffee table and left the house. Cole got in his car and pulled out of the driveway. He headed for downtown. He could not help but wonder why he had been called to the church this late. Had he done something he should not have? Or, had he not done something he should have? Cole’s mind was eased slightly when he saw the flashing lights of the police cars parked in front of the church. *At least I know it probably wasn’t something I did.* That thought was calming to Cole. He parked his car across the street from the church and got out. None of the police officers tried to stop him as he passed them. He walked into the main entrance way and glanced around. A female canine, a coyote, approached him. She was smaller than he was, but then again he had been feeling a tad larger than he felt he should have been.

“Lord Dûrfëa is awaiting you in his meditation chamber on the thirteenth floor.”

“Thank you.”

She nodded her head and walked away. Cole followed after her, keeping his eyes on her the whole way. What was going on? As far as he could remember there was only twelve floors to the building. Cole followed her to the elevator and got in after she did. The coyote reached for the emergency stop button. Instead of pushing it, she flipped the red button down to reveal a button with the number *13* emblazoned on it. The elevator started up. The coyote also pressed the button for the tenth floor. She stayed at the front of the elevator, while Cole leaned against the back wall of the car. Cole closed his eyes and almost drifted to sleep when the elevator came to a stop. The doors opened on the tenth floor and the coyote disembarked. She stopped just

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outside the doors and turned to face Cole. She did not smile or do much of anything else either. The doors closed again and Cole was alone.

“What the hell is going on?”

Cole started pacing in the cramped space of the elevator car. The digital screen ticked off the last three floors till it read thirteen. The walls of the elevator car began to glow bright red then the walls seemed to close in on him. It was only the red glow that moved towards him. It formed a glowing translucent cage around him. The box then began to mold to the shape of Cole’s body. Cole felt a tingling sensation ripple through every hair on his body just before the searing pain. He looked down just in time to see his close disintegrate and his fur and skin begin to peel away from his muscles. Cole threw his head back and howled in pain, but there was no fur to come to his rescue. Once all his skin was gone, the muscles began to melt from his skeleton. Soon, it was Cole’s skeleton that was left to burn away. His eyes finally went dark, but only for a few seconds. When his sight returned he was in a small room with a desk with a fur behind it. Cole was staring at the floor of the room. He sat up and looked himself over. His body appeared just as it had when he had first boarded the elevator. The receptionist walked from behind the desk and helped Cole to his hindpaws.

“Never been up here before, have you?” The receptionist seemed harmless enough.

“No. New experience. Do all his guests have to go through that?” Cole was breathing hard.

“Yeah. Of course, that’s probably why Lord Dûrfëa doesn’t have many guest up here.”

“Good point.”

“You can go right in, Mr. Sommers.”

“Thank you.”

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Cole walked towards the door. The door swung away from him before he had the chance to even reach for the knob. He stepped through. Inside he found a lavishly decorated meditation chamber. There was a crystal chandelier hanging from the ceiling that was probably a tad too big for the room it was in. There were crimson curtains hanging over the windows and around the bed in the corner. A large lion with two large wings sat on a cushion in the center of the room. The feathers of the wings were the same golden brown as the lion's fur. There was a scar over his left eye and the feathers on his right wing were a little gnarled at the ends. There were two chairs sitting in front of the winged lion. One was empty, but in the other was Detective Victor O'Connell. *What's Jake's father doing here?* Cole wondered if this had something to do with the visit he paid on Jake the other day. Victor rose as Cole entered the room. The lion, Dûrfëa, motioned for both of them to be seated. Victor returned to his chair and Cole took the one beside his. Dûrfëa straightened up.

"I hope you weren't woken by my summons?"

"Of course not, lord."

"Very good. I trust you already know Detective O'Connell."

"Well, I know of him."

"Good. Well, let me fill you in on a few things, Cole. Early this evening, a fur broke into the church and made his way up to the gathering hall. He took from there a very valuable item that I would very much like returned."

"What item?"

"A book, but that is not your concern at the moment. The detective here knows the identity and location of the culprit. I want you to go with Detective O'Connell to retrieve the book. Detective O'Connell will get the book. You will... deal with the thief. Understood?"

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“Yes, my Lord.”

“Good.”

Dûrfëa dismissed Cole and Victor. The two rose from their chairs and bowed. Victor turned and walked towards the door ahead of Cole. He turned the knob and pushed the door opened. He motioned Cole through the door. Cole nodded and stepped through the door. The receptionist rose from his chair and directed Cole and Victor to a section of the floor that was glowing brightly. Cole stood next to Victor and watched the receptionist carefully. He walked to one of the walls and placed his paw against the wood paneling. The panel began to burn red hot and then a shaft of light fell across Cole and Victor. The light pulsed. There was a bright flash and each of them felt a searing pain shoot through their entire body. The pain increased then abruptly stopped. Cole and Victor were back in the elevator and the digital screen showed that they were headed down to the ground floor. Once the elevator stopped, Victor led Cole outside to his car. The two climbed in and Victor started the car. He looked hard at Cole then pulled the car out into the street and began towards their destination.

“You had a job to do.”

“What?” Cole was startled. It was the first time Victor had said a word.

“You had the chance and yet you did nothing. Why?”

“I’m sorry, but I really don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I saw you outside. I saw you walk across the street and go up to the door. He answered and you spoke, but still he lives! What the fuck happened?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Why didn’t you kill my son when you had the chance the other day?”

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Cole felt like someone had just slapped him across the muzzle. Victor knew that Cole had gone over to his house to see Jake. Victor, however, thought that Cole had gone there to kill Jake. *So, does he suspect what really happened that day?* Cole decided it might be a good idea to try and come up with a story of some sort. He thought fast.

“Well, one of the first things I do before the kill is to determine the targets daily routine.”

“And, that entails knocking on their front door?”

“Well, I do that occasionally to see how easy it would be to get in the house, or wherever it is they call home.”

“Impressive.”

Cole turned and stared out the window. He did not think the response he gave was very impressive. He was not pleased with himself, but he was glad that the conversation had been ended. He watched the buildings flash by the window before they abruptly turned into a heavy tree line. It suddenly dawned on Cole, which way they were headed. If he was right, Victor was heading back towards their neighborhood, possibly even towards his own house. Cole hoped he was wrong. He swallowed hard. Cole turned to Victor.

“So, what’s so important about this book?” Cole needed to keep his mind off of where they were just so he would not say something that could get him killed.

“It’s nothing really. It contains a lot different rituals and spells. That sort of thing.”

“What kind of rituals?”

“Summonings, séances, bonding rituals. Bunch of crap, if you ask me. The angels and demons protect the world so we don’t need rituals like that. All the creatures that could harm us were destroyed in the war. Besides, most problems today are furs harming other furs.”

“What about the angels and demons?”



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“What do you mean?”

“Well, particularly with the demons, can we trust them? They have powers and influence far beyond any mortal fur. Who’s to stop them if they get out of hand?”

“I hope, for your sake, that Lord Dûrfëa doesn’t find out your thinking that way. You’re his fursonal assassin for God’s sake! You should be praising his kind. From what I heard, you probably would have killed yourself if he hadn’t have given you your... task.”

“It was more of a rhetorical question.”

Cole looked out the windshield and saw Jake’s house getting large as they drove closer. Victor pulled the car in the driveway and turned off the car. He opened the door and started to get out; Cole remained seated.

“Hey, you comin’?”

“I don’t have a weapon.” It was true, but Cole hoped it would buy him some time.

“Here. Take this.” Victor produced a silver plated gun and gave it to Cole.

Cole took it. “Thanks.”

Cole looked down at the 9mm semiautomatic in his paw. Without thinking, Cole ejected the clip to check to see if the maximum number of bullets was present. When he was satisfied, Cole replaced the magazine and pulled the slide back to check that there was a bullet already in the chamber. Cole looked the gun over a couple times then flipped up the safety catch to ready it for use. *How the hell did I know how to do that?* Cole got out of the car and followed Victor up to the front door. His heart was racing. What would he do? He could refuse to kill Jake. There was a chance that Victor might just shoot them both. *Crap, what I am gonna do?* Cole was practically beside himself. Victor opened the door and stepped in. Cole waited outside. He

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heard Victor call for Jake. Jake's voice drifted through the opened door. He was calm. He did not suspect anything. Victor's voice came through the door.

"You can come in now."

Cole took a deep breath and stepped through the open door. Jake's eyes went wide, very wide. Jake could not understand what he was seeing. His was father was standing right in front of him with the fur that was supposed to kill him. Jake wondered if his father knew what had happened that day Cole had come over. Jake looked at Cole and then back at his father. His father did not seem very happy at all. To be exact, he looked pissed. Cole seemed agitated, almost afraid. Even from across the room, Jake could tell Cole was sweating. He had, after all, been close enough to him to know what to look for. Victor took one step towards his son.

"Why did you do it?"

"Do what?" Jake looked at Cole for help.

"Where's the book?"

"I don't know what..."

"Take off your shirt."

"What?"

Victor pulled a small black revolver from a holster on his back. "Take it off, or I'll shoot you again!"

"Again?" Cole looked down at the gun in his paw.

Jake sighed. He pulled the shirt up over his head. He did not let the shirt fall to the floor. Jake left his arms in the sleeves so that he could quickly throw the shirt back on if he lived long enough. Cole stared at the white bandages wrapped around Jake's right shoulder. Blood stained the bandages. Victor nodded a few times then lowered his gun. There was pain in Jake's face.

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Pain from his shoulder and pain caused by his father's willingness to let someone else kill him while he stood by and watched.

"That's what I thought. Do what you need to."

The words startled him, but Cole nodded and raised the gun. He pointed it at Jake's chest. Jake looked hard at Cole. He searched his face for any sign that he would not shoot him. Cole looked from Jake to his father and back. Now he was really sweating. Cole could feel the sweat rolling down his back and matting the fur to his body. His paw began to shake. It was not noticeable to Jake and his father, but Cole reached up with his other paw to steady himself. Victor seemed to be getting very impatient with him. Victor stepped closer to Cole. Cole could tell he was looking him over. Sizing him up, trying to determine if he would do it. At this point, Cole was hoping that Victor would shoot him and save Jake. Victor started tapping his hindpaw on the ground.

"Well?"

"Well what?" Cole's voice was choked.

"Shoot him, or I will!"

Cole looked at Jake. Jake gave him a small nod of encouragement.

"Do it!"

"Aww, fuck!"

Cole jerked his arm and pulled the trigger. Victor spun away and fell to the ground as the bullet tore into his chest. Jake jumped as the sound of the gunshot startled him. He watched his father fall to the ground and lie motionless. Jake quickly slipped his shirt back over his head and ran into the kitchen. He came back with his coat and a book. Jake stepped past Cole and stuck his hindpaws into his shoes. He did not bother tying the laces. Jake crossed to the door then

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turned to look at Cole. Cole was still standing where he had been, staring down at Victor. Jake grabbed his arm and started pulling him out the door. When they were out on the porch, Jake let go of Cole and ran to his car. Cole came back to himself and followed Jake to the car. Cole opened the passenger side door. There was a towel thrown over the seat. Cole looked underneath and saw the blood coating the black leather. Cole knew the answer, so he did not bother to ask the question. He crawled in and fastened the seat belt. Jake started up the car and pulled out of the driveway. He tore of down the street, tires squealing.

“There’s Cass.” Jake stopped the car and yelled to Cassie. “Get in!”

“What happened? I heard the shots and... Cole?”

Jake started to pull off before she had closed the door. Cassie settled in the back seat and looked at Cole. He was motionless, staring blankly out the windshield. Cassie peered over the back on the chair and saw the nickel-plated gun in his paw. When she saw it, Cassie knew who had done the shooting. It was not hard to figure out who must have gotten shot. Cassie pictured Victor picking himself up off the floor and swearing loudly at the pain and at Cole. She just could not imagine Cole shooting anyfur and killing them. She reached up and squeezed his shoulder. He turned his head slightly but still said nothing. Jake glanced at Cole then looked back at Cassie. Jake squeezed Cole’s knee then returned attention to the road. He had to figure out where they could go to hide. Jake tried not to drive too fast so as to not draw any undue attention to them. However, as soon as he came around the next corner, two police cars and an ambulance blew past them, sirens blaring and lights flashing. A third police car passed them. Cassie turned around in her seat and looked out the back windshield.

“We have a problem.”

## *BURNING ASH*

Jake looked in the rearview mirror and saw the last police cruiser whipping around to follow them. Jake swore loudly. He slammed his hand down on the gas pedal. The sudden burst of speed threw Cassie back into her seat. Cassie pulled the seatbelt down across her and fastened it as the car went skidding around the next corner. Cassie looked back and noticed that the flashing lights were not getting any closer.

“Damn, cat, you can drive!”

“Thank you.”

A bright white light fell over the car. Jake swore again. He knew what the source of the light was. It was the searchlight on the front of the police helicopter that had been called in to keep track of them. Cole moved for the first time since he had gotten in the car. He glanced in the side mirror and saw the police cars in the distance. Jake noticed that he was moving again but the urgency of their situation still did not seem to have hit Cole. Jake pressed the gas a little harder. They started to pull out of the light, but then the car’s tires began to slip on the icy road. Jake looked in the rearview mirror at Cassie. Her eyes were closed and there was a faint purple glow coming from just out of sight. The tires slipped one last time then the car began to ride as smoothly as before. Jake started to ask then decided that it was not a good idea to question any miracle that saves your life. Cole hung his head out of the window and looked at the front tire then at the back tire. Both were trailing luminescent purple energy behind them.

“Cassie.” Cole’s voice was low enough that neither Jake nor Cassie heard him.

“Okay, God, you saw fit to keep us on the road, and I thank you very much, now could you do something about the helicopter and the police cars?”

“When did you start believing in the prayer thing?”

“About five seconds ago when we didn’t go plowing through that house on the corner.”

## *BURNING ASH*

“Cole. Put your head back in the car and roll up the window.”

Cassie’s voice, coming from the back seat, was shaky but stern. Cole sat back in his seat and rolled up the window. Cassie placed her paws palm down on the back seat. She shut her eyes and concentrated. Jake floored the gas pedal. The car leapt forward out of the chopper’s searchlight. Purple energy suddenly washed over the entire car then vanished just as quickly. The light fell across them again but did not hold on them for too long. It began darting about the road. The police cruisers began to slow and fall behind them. Jake sighed and eased off the gas a little. His mind began to race. Jake was glad they had lost the cops but was very confused as to how they managed it. Cole turned around in his chair and looked back at Cassie. There was sweat rolling down her face. Her entire body was trembling. The engraved markings on her bracelets were glowing bright purple. The energy flowed away from the bracelets but the tendrils terminated a short distant from the silver bands.

Jake steered the car out of the subdivision and pressed the gas little harder. Cole turned back around and looked out and saw the high school coming into view. He looked at Jake then glanced back at Cassie. He caught sight of the helicopter searchlight coming down the road behind them. Cole gritted his teeth. The beam passed over them as the helicopter flew on down the street. Jake pulled the car into the drop-off lane at the high school. A police cruiser passed in front of the school. One of the cops inside used the light on the side to sweep the courtyard of the school. The light washed right over the car, but the cops did nothing. When the car had passed, Jake and Cole got out of the car. Jake slammed the door and took a few steps away. He followed after the police car with his eyes. He sighed and turned around and saw only Cole looking very confused. The car was nowhere. Jake opened his mouth to speak, but then the car reappeared. He looked up at Cole to see if he was just as confused as he was. Cole rushed to the

*BURNING ASH*

back door. Jake did the same and threw it open. Cassie lay across the back seat unconscious, sweat staining her shirt.

“Cole, get her inside. I’ll hide the car.”

“Right.”

\* \* \*

*ASH* sat at the kitchen counter. His cell phone lay in front of him. He was debating whether or not to call Cole to see if he was ready to meet. Ash had not heard from him in a couple of days and was getting worried. Ash reached for the phone, but it started ringing before he had touched it. The display flashed on. *MOM*. Ash flipped open the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hey, sweetie. Just wanted to call and check on you. You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Well, I’m not going to have to stay the whole day. I should be home around two. Maybe even earlier.”

Ash checked his watch. It was barely nine o’clock. His mother had been at work for only about an hour. The two of them said their good-byes and hung up. Ash set his cell back on the counter and continued to stare at it. He wondered what he might say if he reached Cole. Would Cole be awake this early? Ash decided to call him. He was not worried about Cole fussing or yelling. Even if he did, Ash would just be glad that Cole would be fussing and yelling about something that Ash may have actually had an active role in. The phone rang. It rang

*BURNING ASH*

again. It rang four more times before someone answered. Ash waited for the fur on the other end to answer.

“Hello?”

“Cassie?”

“Ash! I was beginning to wonder if you were gonna get in touch with us.”

“What are you doing with Cole’s phone?”

“We ran into a few problems yesterday. We had to go into hiding.”

“All you all right?”

“We’re fine. How are you?”

“Pretty good. Where are you?”

“We’re hiding out at the high school. You should come by. There’re a few things we have to discuss.”

“All right. Where’s Cole? Can I talk to him?”

“Well, no. Cole’s a little busy right now.”

“What with?”

The other end went silent. Ash figured that Cassie was checking to see where Cole was, so he waited. The silence lengthened.

“Cass?”

“What?”

“Where’s Cole?”

“He’s busy.” Her voice was rough, but hushed.

“Cassie. What is Cole doing?”

“Not what. Who.”



## *BURNING ASH*

“Ya see, somehow I knew you were gonna say that. Well, I guess I could... hold on.”

The doorbell rang, nearly causing Ash to jump right out of his pelt. In the time it took Ash to get from the kitchen to the front door, the doorbell rang one more time and somefur knocked very loudly twice. Ash got to the door with Cassie holding on the other end. He opened the door and their stood Detective Sean Browning and his two criminalist cohorts. Ash sighed and turned his attention back to Cassie.

“I’m gonna have to call you back. Bye.” Ash closed the phone and slipped it in his pocket. “Now, what, may I ask, can I do for the three of you?”

“You can come with us.” Detective Browning sure did have a way with words.

“Why?”

Jacqueline Price stepped forward, cutting the detective off before he could retort. “We have a court order to exhume your brother’s casket.”

“For God’s sake! Why?” Ash was starting to get angry with these three.

“We were throwing some theories around at the lab and one we kept coming back to was kinda odd, but it made us wonder.”

She paused. Ash raised his eyebrows and waited for her to continue. He had an idea what she might say but he wanted to hear the words pass her lips.

“We proposed, as the evidence points to your brother, that he is not dead. However unlikely this is, I believe in being very thorough and that’s why I got the warrant for your brother’s body. The warrant stipulates that a member of the family must be there to identify the remains.”

“Fine. Let me grab my coat.”

## *BURNING ASH*

Ash walked back into the kitchen and retrieved his coat from the back of the chair he had hung it on. He wrapped a scarf around his neck as he walked back to the door. Ash stepped out onto the porch and closed and locked the door behind him. The three cops led the way to their vehicles. It was the same black sedan and grey SUV from the parking garage back when he had found out about Julie's death and this whole mess started. The Browning brothers climbed into the sedan while Jacqueline ushered Ash into the SUV. No doubt she wanted to talk to him some more about something just as absurd, if not more so than, her previous theory. Ash had to admit, though, it was a very novel idea. Micah Reynolds, the Undead Fox! *I'm gonna burn in Hell for that thought, aren't I?* Ash was surprised that Jacqueline Price said nothing the entire drive to the cemetery where Micah and his father had been lain to rest.

There was a backhoe sitting on the snow-covered hill leading up to the graves of his father and brother. Two more police officers were standing off to one side conversing with the backhoe operator and three other furs in hardhats. Ash figured they were trying to think of a good reason why they had been dragged to the cemetery on a cold Wednesday morning. When the SUV and sedan came to a halt at the foot of the hill, the six furs turned to look down the hill at them. One of the officers started towards them. Price and the two raccoons stopped to listen to what the fur had to say, but Ash continued up the hill. He ignored the stares from the other police officers. Ash stopped in front of the grave of his brother. He looked at the headstone and was unsettled to see it, but at the same time Ash felt he had seen it a hundred times before. He could see the engraved words in his mind when he closed his eyes.

Micah David Reynolds  
November 7, 1992 – March 25, 2002  
Beloved Son and Brother

## *BURNING ASH*

Ash squatted down and touched the tightly packed dirt and grass with his paw. He got a strange feeling when he touched the ground covering his brother's casket. The fur on the back of his neck stood on end. That was never a good sign. The last time it had happened, Ash and two humans had been ambushed by vampires. The likelihood of that happening again was slim to none, though. Ash was probably in more danger from being attacked by zombies this early in the morning. A searing pain shot through his head for a split second and was gone. He felt it nonetheless. Ash straightened up as his escorts came up behind him. Daniel Browning took Ash off to the side to clear the way for the backhoe. Ash and Daniel moved off to stand underneath a large oak tree. Ash got the distinct feeling that this Daniel Browning was staring at him. He turned to look at him.

"Something I can do for you?" Ash did not care about coming off as rude anymore.

"Wipe yourself off. You're bleeding."

Ash wiped at his nose with his paw and felt blood running from it. "Oh God."

"Here." Daniel handed him a cloth rag.

"Thanks, Mr. Browning."

"Please, call me Daniel. Now, let me guess. You have an as yet unknown disease that causes you to lose consciousness, bleed from the nose and ears and comes with very frequent headaches. Am I right?"

"Everything but the ears bleeding. How did you know?"

"I had the disease, too."

"You... wait! Did you say 'had'? As in past tense?"

"Yeah."

"Well..."

## BURNING ASH

“Mr. Reynolds!” Jacqueline Price’s voice startled Ash. “Come over here, please.”

Ash sighed and walked to where she was. The backhoe had finished moving all of the dirt out of the grave and they were beginning to raise the casket. Ash waited until the casket had been settled nicely on the ground and opened to walk any closer. Detective Browning opened the casket and gasped. Ash moved around so he could look inside and what he saw disturbed him as well. The maple casket that was to hold his brother’s remains till the wood rotted was completely empty. The pillow that had been placed under his head did not even look like anything had been lying on it. Ash could not believe this little turn of events. *That damn raccoon was actually on to something.* Ash had rested his paw on the rim of the opened casket, but now he withdrew it and stood. He moved to rub his forehead, but as he moved his paw past his nose he smelled something. He sniffed at his paw again. Ash backed away from the casket as he tried to place the smell. He stopped abruptly as it hit him.

*Sulfur!* Ash turned to look at CSI Price and Detective Browning. “Can you dig up my father?”

They exchanged confused looks. Price looked back at Ash. “Why?”

“Please? Can you?”

“Are you giving us permission?”

“Yes.”

Detective Browning walked to the backhoe operator and gave him his new orders. Ash noticed that the operator did not complain about having to unearth another coffin. He was glad because that meant there would not be a long wait. In what seemed like no time at all, the furs in hardhats were lifting the casket free of the six-foot hole. Ash waited for them to set the casket firmly on the ground before stepping closer. He knelt beside it and placed his paws on the edge

## *BURNING ASH*

of the lid. Ash pulled the lid up. The same sulfurous odor drifted up from the broken seal. He pushed the lid all the way back. He stared into the casket and was silent for a few minutes. He was staring down into the coffin. Ash was staring right at the pillow that should have had his father's head lying on it. Ash sat back and closed the coffin. He rested his open paws on the lid and lowered his head. His mind was racing. Where was his father? Where was Micah and could he possibly have been responsible for the death of Julie? Ash began to stand up from the ground when he became lightheaded. Daniel Browning caught him before he fell.

“Whoa there! You all right?”

“Yeah.”

Jacqueline stepped forward. “Dan, take Mr. Reynolds back to his house.”

“Sure thing.”

“What should we do with those?” Detective Browning jerked a thumb in the direction of the two coffins.

“Mr. Reynolds?” CSI Price wanted an answer as well.

“I don't give a fuck what you do with 'em.” The words did not come out with near as much contempt as Ash had wanted.

“Right. C'mon.” Daniel steadied Ash and started leading him towards the SUV. Ash climbed into the car and sat quietly. Browning got in behind the wheel and started the engine. Neither of them said anything until they were away from the cemetery. Browning spoke first.

“I didn't bother to look, but they weren't there, were they?”

“I'd rather not talk about it.”

“Okay, new subject. Remember what I was saying back there? About once having some disease?”

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“Yeah, you said you *had* it. How the hell were you cured?”

“Hell is right.”

“Come again.”

“I contracted the disease five years ago. About three years ago, my brother, Sean, had had enough of watching me suffer.” Daniel took a breath and waited for the light to turn green. “He left the town we were in one day and didn't tell me where he was going. He was gone for almost two days when I started to get worse. I started coughing up blood and then....”

He stopped talking. Ash waited for him to continue, but Daniel did not seem to want to.

“Then what?” Ash pressed him.

“Then I just stopped. No more coughing. No more pain. Nothing. Sean showed up two days later. I told him about what had happened. He was ecstatic, but he wasn't surprised. I tried to get him to tell me what had happened. He wouldn't talk. So, I beat it out of him. I had to bruise three of his ribs and break his nose before he'd talk. He wasn't mad, he was just happy that I had the strength to kick the crap out of him.”

“What had he done?”

“He made a deal with the devil. He sold his soul in exchange for my being cured of the disease. I got to live without fear of dying any minute and he got his life shortened to ten more years. I never forgave him for it. We stopped hunting demons and came here and found jobs. Though he doesn't know this, I'm still trying to find a way to undo this whole fuckin' mess. So, that's the whole story. Any questions?”

“You said you got the disease five years ago?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Any idea how you got it?”

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“No. Well, actually, my brother and I had a theory. We were tracking this demon that we thought had killed a bunch of furs. Turns out he hadn’t, but he was surprisingly cheerful despite us trying to kill him. He was following a demon, too. But, that’s another story. Anyway, at the time it felt like a bee sting, but it turned out that the other demon poisoned me. Or, at least, that was the best we could come up with.”

“Who was the other demon? The one you thought had done the killings?”

“It was Kordak. He was tracking the demon actually responsible because he had once been a trusted advisor to Kordak.”

*Kordak.* Ash’s mind raced back to that day five years ago in this life when he had been stung by a bee. Or, so he had thought and come to accept. Was it possible that even this Kordak had evil intentions when it came to the citizens of Clawson? Was it possible that this Kordak was performing some sort of deranged experiment? Or, was it the simplest explanation of them all? Was this Kordak not *this* Kordak? *Fuckin’ bastard! I had him right in front of me!* Ash knew he should not have been angry with himself. Kordak was very adept at playing with the minds of others and Ash’s mind had been thrown off ever since last Saturday. Daniel continued to glance over at Ash, but he said nothing more. Ash seemed like he wanted to mull over all that Daniel had just told him. The fox’s brow was furrowed in deep concentration.

Daniel stopped the SUV and unlocked the passenger’s side door. He scanned the neighborhood and took in all he saw. The cars belonging to his parents were both parked in the driveway. Ash opened the door and stepped down onto the pavement. He walked around the front of the car and stopped. Ash looked towards the house. He was thinking of what he might say to his parents about what he had discovered in the cemetery. Ash shrugged and hung his head. He walked up to the driver’s side window. Daniel rolled the window down to hear

## *BURNING ASH*

anything the fox had to say. Ash opened his mouth to speak, but the words would not come. Ash had frozen as the fur on the back of his neck stood on end.

\* \* \*

*ASH* jammed the front door key in the keyhole and turned it. The sensation on the back of his neck was getting stronger and it was only making him frantic. His paws were shaking so badly that he could not even turn the key the right way. Daniel had seen Ash's predicament and had climbed down from the SUV. Ash closed his eyes and breathed. His shaking paws steadied and he turned the key. The lock clicked and Ash turned the knob. The door swung away and revealed the inner tranquility of the two-story residence. Daniel breathed a sigh of relief as he looked in the open door. Ash stepped through, the feeling of dread not leaving him at all. Something was terribly wrong with everything. Both his parents were supposed to be home. They should have rushed to the door the moment Ash began fumbling with the lock.

Ash walked further into the house in search of either of his parents. He would prefer to find both of them in perfect health, but at the moment finding even one of them would help him relax. Ash took off his coat and placed it on the wall hanger. He walked through the living room and into the kitchen. Nothing was out of its place. The room remained as it had when Ash had left a few hours before. Almost as before. There were now two paw prints on the counter top. The positioning indicated that the fur to whom the prints belong had braced him or herself against the counter. Perhaps during a chase or struggle. Ash looked closer at the paw prints on the counter and saw that they were yellow in color. Some powdery substance from the owner's



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palms had been transferred to the marble counter. The moment he bent closer, that all-too-familiar stench wafted up to his nose.

“Sulfur.”

“What did you say?” Daniel had followed into the kitchen.

Ash did not answer the raccoon’s question. He continued to walk around the counter, moving slower than before so he would not miss anything. Ash turned to move into the dining area when his shoe lost traction and slid. Ash grabbed the counter with one paw and the door frame with the other to steady himself. Daniel stepped forward in case he fell. Ash looked down at his hindpaws. He was standing in a massive pool of deep red blood. Ash followed the blood pool with his eyes back to its origin. The equine form of Cameron Scott sat against the wall dividing the kitchen from the dining room. There was a large gash across his throat. Ash examined the body closer and saw two small puncture wounds. One was in Cameron’s thigh; the other was through his right arm. The femoral and brachial arteries. Julie.

*Micah!*

Ash touched Cameron’s shoulder then rose from the floor. Daniel pulled out his cell phone and dialed the police dispatcher. Ash walked around the body and over to the table. There was a piece of paper lying on the corner of the table. The paper looked as if it had been folded and creased numerous times and then unfolded and placed flat on the table. Ash looked down at the paper and saw that a note had been written on it. The words were written in a dark red ink. *No, not ink. Blood!* Ash snatched the note up from the table and read the blood red words.

*Ash,  
We blame you for what happened, you son of  
a bitch! We killed the pretender and left him*

## BURNING ASH

*for you in the kitchen beside this note. We killed the bitch because she married the bastard! We've taken everything from you that you took from us. Rot in hell, you fucking murderer!*

*Your two victims*

Ash looked up from the note. He began trying to sort through what the note had said. *The pretender.* Given the reference to the kitchen, that obviously referred to Cameron. *The bitch.* Ash jerked his head around. His eyes stopped on the stairs leading to the second floor of the house. There were bloody shoe prints going up, but none coming down. Ash crumpled the note in one paw, but did not throw it away. He bounded up the stairs. When he got to the landing at the top of the stairs, Ash looked down and followed the bloody prints as they led into the master bedroom. The door was closed. *Mom!* Ash ran at the door and kicked it as hard as he could. Splinters flew as the door fell away and banged against the wall. Ash looked in and was both angered and horrified at what he saw.

A fur, a fox to be specific, wearing a long black coat was holding the motionless body of Lilia Reynolds-Scott over the bed in the master bedroom. The fur was turned so Ash could not see his face. The fur's ears twitched. The fox jerked his head around to glare at Ash. Ash stared back at the unsettlingly dead pair of eyes. Blood dripped from the fox's muzzle. The fox let Lilia fall softly to the bed then turned to fully face Ash. As he turned, the fox pulled a long blade from Lilia's abdomen. The blade slid out; there was a squelching sound as blood spurted out across the fox's clothes. Lilia's body jerked. She turned her head and looked at Ash with pleading eyes. *She's alive!* Ash looked back at the attacker whom he saw now to be his own father dead these seven years. Dead. But, not buried. Jesse Reynolds, back from the dead,

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raised the bladed weapon in front of his face. Ash watched as the blade split to become five blades, then as each blade shrank to become the fingers of Jesse's right paw.

"See you around, you little bastard!"

Jesse bared his blood-covered teeth as he spoke. At that moment, his clothes seemed to come alive. The clothes wrapped around his entire body and transformed into a bubble of dark energy. The bubble shrank into nothingness and the resurrected Jesse Reynolds was gone. Ash stood riveted in place for a moment, but was brought back by the pained coughs of his mother. He rushed to the bed lifted his mother up to comfort her. They both knew there was nothing that could be done for her. The wound was too severe. Lilia was going to die. Ash held her close and stroked her hair. Ash did not care that his white shirt and black pants were being stained by his mother's blood. Nor did he care that this was not technically his mother. Tears began to run from his eyes and down through the fur on his cheeks. He had been listening to her labored breathing when he noticed that it had stopped. The tears began to come harder.

Ash heard sirens coming down the street. He knew where they were going and how they had found out. *Daniel's only doing his job.* Ash knew he would have to leave to talk to the police, but he did not want to let her go. Daniel walked into the room followed closely by an ursine detective, a uniformed cop and a fur carrying a silver case. Another criminalist. Daniel watched Ash. Ash looked up at him, his eyes streaming tears and red. He held his mother close even as Daniel and the uniform cop tried to pull Ash away and out of the room. He gave her one last kiss on the cheek before allowing himself to be led out of the room and out of the house. *I'm sorry, Mom.* On their way to the door, Daniel grabbed Ash's coat off the rack. Daniel put the coat around Ash's shoulders as they stepped out onto the porch. Ash looked around at the gathered police cars and another SUV similar to the one Daniel drove.

## *BURNING ASH*

Ash also saw that a small crowd of furs. The neighbors. The commotion caused by the arrival of the contingent of police vehicles had drawn their attention. Some of the gathered furs looked on with mild interest, while others had deep concern in their eyes. A few of the more concerned gasped when Ash walked out the door and they saw the blood-drenched front of his shirt. A female fur, a tigress, took a step forward when she saw Ash. The tigress was older than Ash's mother was but was no less as gentle or as kind as Lilia had been. Her name was Mallory Carter. She had lived in the house next door to Ash and his family for as long as he could remember. Or, at least, in this world that was true. She was the mother of the tiger from the day his father and Micah had died. She met Daniel and Ash as they came through the lawn to the edge of the street. Mrs. Carter looked Ash over as he lowered himself to lean against the tire of one of the police cruisers. Ash brought his paw up to massage his forehead with his fingers. His paws were both bathed in blood.

A second detective, a doe, came out of the house and beckoned Mrs. Carter away from Ash. They stepped off to the side to talk quietly, but they had not moved far enough away. Ash heard the detective begin questioning the tigress, opening with an introduction.

"I'm Detective Halliwell, ma'am. I'd like to ask you a few questions, if I may?" The detective was kind and courteous.

"Yes, of course."

"First off, miss.... It is miss, isn't it?"

"Missus, actually. Mrs. Carter. Mallory."

"Forgive me. Now, how long have you known young Mr. Reynolds here?"

"I've known him ever since he was a little puppy. I live in the house to the left of his. When his parents would go out, I would often watch him and his younger brother, God rest him."

*BURNING ASH*

“I’m sorry, I don’t...”

“Ash’s little brother died in a car accident seven years ago. His father, as well.”

“I see. That could speak to his mental stability.”

“I beg your pardon? His mental stability! Are you seriously considering he had anything to do with this horrible incident?”

“Ma’am, calm down. I only asked because my partner inside feels he’s our best suspect. He just wanted to be sure.”

“How dare he? There is no way that boy would harm his mother. I mean, he loves... loved her so much. And, after losing her once before, he wouldn’t want to lose her again.”

“What do you mean? ‘Losing her once before’? Explain that.”

“Five years ago, Lilia was killed by a monster in an opening battle of the Mystic Wars. A lovely angel fox with gold fur brought her back.”

“I see.”

At this point, Daniel rose and walked over to Detective Halliwell and Mrs. Carter. Mallory Carter walked back over to Ash and knelt beside him.

“Penny.” Daniel nodded to the detective.

“Danny.” Penny smiled at the raccoon. “What are you doing here?”

“I’ll explain everything, but first, do me favor.”

“Maybe later.” The look on her face was very playful.

“Not what I meant, sweetie. I want you to tell your partner something for me.”

“What?” Detective Penny Halliwell made ready to write down the message.

## *BURNING ASH*

“Tell that fat bastard that there’s no way Ash Reynolds murdered his parents. When they were killed, he was with me, Sean and Jacqueline at the cemetery digging up the empty coffin’s of his supposed-to-be-dead father and brother!”

Penny spoke as she finished writing. “Right. Now, should I say ‘fat bastard’, or would ‘fat fuck’ convey the necessary contempt?”

“‘Fat bastard’ is fine with me, but whatever makes you feel better.”

“Scratch ‘bastard’, insert ‘fuck’! There, that’ll do nicely. Ooh, even better! ‘Fat fucking bastard’! Yeah, that’ll do it.” She lowered the pad and pen and looked up at Daniel. “So, you gonna come over after your shift?”

“I hope so, but this case I’m working on is taking so many twists and turns, it’s liable to drive me up the wall.”

“Okay, well, don’t let it.... Oh, great. Speak of the fat fuck, here he comes now.”

A large, rotund bear with black fur came ambling out of the front door to Ash’s house. He stood at the top of the steps and beckoned for the deer detective. She sighed and signaled that she would be with him in a moment. Penny turned back to Daniel and smiled at him. She quickly frowned and furrowed her brow as something that had been said came back to her and confused her.

“Empty coffins, you say? Well, I’m sure you’ll figure it out. See you later, Danny.”

Ash watched the two detectives as they spoke together. Daniel walked back over and rejoined Ash and Mrs. Carter. Mrs. Carter pulled a pawkerchief from her pawbag and began wiping the blood from Ash’s paws. Daniel and Mrs. Carter were talking to Ash, trying to comfort him, but he was not listening. He had tuned them out as he watched the detective named Penny get into a heated conversation with her partner. The ursine’s dark eyes kept darting

## *BURNING ASH*

towards Ash. Ash began to wish that he read lips. The fat detective nodded at something Penny had said then he pushed past her and began heading towards where Ash was sitting. Knowing what was coming, Ash rose from the ground. Slipping his arms into the sleeves, Ash pulled the coat close around him. The act was more to hide the large bloodstain on his shirt than it was to keep out the cold on this Wednesday afternoon. The bear made it to where Ash was and politely dismissed Daniel and Mrs. Carter.

They left, but not before exchanging worried looks then glancing at the large detective. The bear waited until the two of them were far enough away that they could not hear what he would say to Ash. When he was satisfied, he cleared his throat and began.

“Mr. Reynolds. I’m Detective Madsen. I’d like to talk to you about what happened here today.”

“All right.” Ash’s weariness showed in his voice.

“Had you talked to either of your parents prior to your finding them?”

“My mother called my cell around nine.”

“Why?”

“She wanted to let me know that she might be home from work earlier than usual. I didn’t think she’d be back till around two or so.”

“Guess she arrived home a little earlier than that seeing as it’s only just now turning one. If you’ll give me the name of her place of work, I can have Detective Halliwell find out when she left.”

“She’s head of fur resources at Tobin Pharmaceuticals corporate office in town. The number is 565-2588.”

“Thank you. Penny.”

*BURNING ASH*

“Bill?”

“Call this number and find when Mrs. Reynolds-Scott left for the day and why?”

“Okay.” The doe pulled out a cell phone and started dialing the number.

“Now. What about your father?”

“Stepfather. He left the house at about 8:30. He had the day off and had to make a run into town to see his angel. I don’t know when he got back either, but he wasn’t home when I left around nine.”

“And, why did you leave the house so early?”

“Detective Sean Browning, and two criminalists showed up and needed me to go with them to the cemetery. Mr. Browning here was one of them. You can check with him.”

“I will.” Madsen wrote the information down in his notebook then cleared his throat.

“Now, let’s talk about your father.”

Ash sighed and leaned back on the police cruiser’s hood. He had to prop himself up on the car as his right leg had begun to shake. An extreme pounding sensation had begun to build in his forehead as the detective had asked his questions. Now that the conversation had turned to his, the pain was growing and becoming more unbearable. Ash rubbed his forehead with his fingers to try and alleviate the pain.

“Is it possible that your father found out that his former wife remarried and decided to come back and confront her?”

“No, it’s not...”

“And, that when he arrived he found your stepfather in the house with your mother and was so consumed by his anger that he murdered the both of them?”

“Shut up! SHUT UP!!”



## *BURNING ASH*

Ash reached forward and seized the collar of the bear's blazer and spun him around and slammed him against the police car. Daniel and Penny saw Ash's attack and rushed to grab the fox. The doe and raccoon latched onto his arms and tried to pull him off. They succeeded, but Ash maintained his hold on the blazer and continued to berate the ursine detective.

“Shut your mouth! Don't you say another fucking word about my father! Don't you....”

All of Ash's strength suddenly left his arms. His paws went numb for a second and he lost his grip on the bear. Daniel and Penny could now pull him away with little to no effort. Ash stumbled back a few feet from the car. He shook off the two furs helping him stand and moved forward and placed his paws on the hood of the car. Ash tried to breathe but the more he tried the more he coughed. He turned around and slumped to the ground, his back against the bumper of the cruiser. He could not stop coughing. Mrs. Carter ran over and knelt beside Ash. He started choking. Mrs. Carter took hold of Ash's shoulders and turned him sideways as he began coughing up blood. The deep red blood stood in sharp contrast to the white snow covering of the lawn in front of Ash's home. Mrs. Carter pulled Ash back up and gasped. There were streams of blood running from his nose as well as from his right eye. Penny bent down with another white kerchief and wiped the blood from his face.

Ash tried breathing again and found that he could. He closed his eyes and laid his head back a little. When he did, Ash inadvertently swallowed the blood that was still in his mouth. The taste and feel of the blood running down his throat did not disturb him at all. He was already familiar with the taste having suffered many a punch and kick to the face in the past. In his own past, not this horrendous other life that existed. He had not become angry with the detective because the possibility of his father being the murderer was preposterous; quite the opposite, he knew his father killed his mother but he had not wanted to believe it. The fact that

## *BURNING ASH*

the detective said it made it true and brought a sense of failure to Ash. He could have at least tried to stop his father from leaving. Saving his mother had been out of the question. The wound in her abdomen went all the way through her back. She had lost too much blood and would have died no matter what Ash did to hinder that loss.

Ash turned his head and glanced back up at the house. The door was still opened. It was not opened as wide as it was before, but it was still far from being closed all the way. Ash watched as the door was pushed closer to the frame, but still not all the way. A few quick flashes escaped through the crack in the door. One of the furs inside was taking pictures of something on the back of the door. A bloody pawprint, possibly. His ear twitched. Something was wrong. Something was coming. Something was going to happen and Ash could not figure out what that was. Two more flashes and the door was opened again. A fur came out carrying a black digital camera in his paws. He walked to the back of a gray Hummer H2 and connected the camera directly to a portable printer. Ash heard the printer come to life and begin printing the images the photographer had taken. When the printer was finished and had gone silent, the photographer studied the pictures then brought them to the detective to scrutinize. Madsen took them and examined the photos. Whatever was in them seemed to perplex him as much as the fur that had taken it.

“Mr. Reynolds, one more thing and you can go. These are photos of a symbol that was found on the back of your door. Do you have any idea what they are of?”

Ash rose shakily from his place on the street and leaned against the car. He took the photos and looked at them. The pictures were indeed of some sort of symbol that Ash figured had some basis in alchemy or divination. The symbol consisted of a circle inscribed with an equilateral triangle. Three arrows extended from the midpoint of the base of the triangle. One

## *BURNING ASH*

arrow went straight down to connect with the circle, while the other two angled off from the first to touch the circle at different points. Inside the triangle, there was the image of flames reminiscent of a campfire. Something about the symbol bothered Ash. It was not in where it had been placed, but how it had been placed. Part of the symbol had been drawn on the door in blood, but the rest was on the door facing and the wall. The symbol had been broken in two and would only be whole again once the door was closed all the way.

“The door.” The words had barely left Ash’s mouth when the detective’s voice drifted towards his ears.

“All right, now that everyfur’s out, seal the house and all that good stuff.”

“NO!”

Ash’s cry did not go unheard, but it was too late to do any good. The click of the bolt as it slid into the doorjamb seemed to echo through the still afternoon air. A bright red flash burst from every window of the house. The fur at the door saw and turned to run but was not fast enough. With a deafening roar, the house exploded in a ball of orange flames. The explosion consumed the fleeing fur and completely incinerated the body. The house, now nothing more than splinters, rained down on the gathered law enforcement officers and curious onlookers. Ash looked up to see the burning remains of his former home. Madsen gazed at the charred skeleton that once been a young officer in the Clawson Police Department. Now, it was Madsen’s turn to lose his self-control. The bear rounded on Ash and seized his throat, pushing the leather of his collar into his skin. Pushing him down against the car hood, Madsen came as close to Ash’s face as he dared.

## BURNING ASH

“What the hell was that?” There were tears welling up in the brown, ursine eyes. “That was my son! My boy! He was my only son and now he’s dead! Tell me what the fuck just happened!”

“It was an Incendiary Seal. It’s inert while broken, but the moment it is completed whatever it’s attached to will explode.”

“You did this! You did this, you fucking bastard!”

“Why would I blow up my own house!? Uh!? Tell me that! Why would I destroy my own goddamned house!? Why the fuck would I do any of this? I didn’t even know you’re son, let alone know he’d be here and the last one out of the house. I’m sorry about your son. I really am. Let go of me, please.”

The bear’s only response was to let go of Ash and turn away from the fox. Penny walked to the detective and touched his shoulder caringly. Daniel looked from the pair of detectives to Ash, but did not move from where he stood. Ash looked down at the photos of the bloody seal. *Whose blood is this?* Ash touched the photos with one paw and massaged his throat with the other. His paw touched the gold medallion dangling from the collar on his neck. Ash tugged at the leather to alleviate the pain it had caused. He wanted to tear it from his neck for the pain the whole goddamned thing represented. He gripped it, but before he could do anything, a black four-door sedan drove up and stopped. The two small flags flying in the breeze, attached to the fenders like on a diplomat’s car, each bore the symbol of Kordak. The driver stepped out of the car and walked over to where Ash was leaning on the car. The driver was a well-built badger who walked with a stride befitting a high military officer. His deep brown eyes held the stare of all he looked at and that was everyfur present.

“Mr. Reynolds?” The fur’s voice was deep and commanding.

## BURNING ASH

“Who are you?” *I should probably know this.*

“My name’s Cain. Jason Cain. I am to drive you into town. Lord Brydak wishes to see you immediately.”

“What about?”

“I was not apprised of that information. Only that I was to retrieve you. Another driver was to acquire Ms. Chase and deliver her to the meeting. This way, sir.”

*Ms. Chase? Bianca.* “Detective, it seems I have a date with a demon. Can I go?”

Penny Halliwell looked around at him and nodded. “Yeah, get out of here before he changes my mind.”

Ash followed the badger, this Jason Cain, to the sedan. Cain opened the rear door for Ash and closed it after he had climbed in. Cain turned and opened the driver’s side door and settled himself behind the steering column. The badger put the keys in the ignition and turned it. The engine roared to life. Applying pressure to the gas pedal, the sedan started off towards downtown Clawson, gaining speed as it went. Ash sat in the back seat and remained completely silent.

\* \* \*

*ASH* stepped out of the sedan and followed Jason Cain into the building belonging to the resident demon of Clawson. Cain led Ash to the back of the main lobby to the only elevator that stopped at the twenty-third floor. That floor was where Kordak, or Brydak, kept his office and meditation chamber. The badger pressed the button with one of his gloved fingers and stood back away from the door. It took a minute or two, but the elevator finally arrived. When the

## BURNING ASH

doors parted, Cain motioned for Ash enter. He did so, but noted that the badger did not follow him. This Jason Cain merely stood in front of him and smiled and waved as the doors closed. Ash frowned and let his ears flop to either side. Ash closed his eyes and tried to figure out why he had been summoned here. He and Bianca both had been called. *Of course, Bianca!* This must be about the favor Ash had asked of Brydak before he was sure of his treachery.

Ash did not much care for seeing either of them at the moment, but he was already here, he might as well go up and see what was happening. *It might be good for a laugh, or two.* Afterwards, Ash was free to go to Furrtown and meet up with Cassie and the two lovebirds. He would and he would get them home no matter what. He swore to get them back where they belonged even at the cost of his own life. *Sorry, Calleigh, looks like our part of this story is going to end unhappily. Goodbye.* The thought was a bit premature, but Ash could not seem to help himself. Before he could finish kicking himself, the elevator stopped and the doors slid apart. Ash stepped out, his paws in his coat pockets keeping the coat close to hide the blood. He walked to the door of Brydak's office and opened it, completely ignoring the secretary who started to rise from her chair to stop him. Once inside, Ash closed the door but did not walk any closer to the desk.

Brydak was sitting behind his desk with his eyes on Bianca. Bianca was sitting in a chair in front of the desk with her head down. Ash watched her and noticed that her shoulders were heaving up and down. She was crying. Brydak was talking to her. He was telling her how everything would be all right among other supportive, nurturing things that could be said. Ash remained silently, standing beside the door. He was halfway tempted to just walk out now before they noticed him. He did not leave fast enough. Brydak looked up from Bianca and

## *BURNING ASH*

caught sight of Ash. The expression on his face remained exactly the same. He looked at Ash with the same care and love in his eyes that was in his voice.

“Ah, Ash. I’m glad you came.”

At the revelation that Ash was in the office, Bianca swung around. There were tears streaming down her face and fire in her eyes. Bianca bolted up from the chair, crossed the room to stand in front of Ash and glared up into his eyes. Ash looked back at her impassively. Brydak watched from behind his desk as Bianca pulled her right arm back and swung it upwards at Ash, her open paw catching him hard across his muzzle. The sound of the slap echoed through the closed office. Ash barely flinched. His head jerk to the right, but otherwise he remained perfectly still, paws still in his pockets keeping his coat closed. Ash opened his mouth a little and licked at the blood that was running from his newly split lip. He turned his head back and looked past Bianca and straight at Brydak.

“I take it you told her.”

“Yes, I did.”

“Fine.”

With that, Ash turned and opened the door and left the office. Bianca followed Ash out the door and into the hall past the secretary’s desk. When she caught up to him, Bianca reached out and grabbed his arm to stop Ash walking away. He stopped but he did not turn around to look at her. Bianca walked around in front of Ash, tears still flowing, but the anger had left her eyes. She looked at Ash, searching his face for any clue that might help her understand why Brydak had separated them and insist that she find a new mate. Ash’s cold stare did not betray anything to the bereaved bunny.

“Ash. Why?”

*BURNING ASH*

“Why what?”

“Why were we separated? Why did you request it? Was it something I said or did? Something I didn’t say or do? What was it?”

“It wasn’t anything you did. It was me, and I’m not trying to sound cliché or anything. I just wanted you to be happy.”

“Happy! You wanted me to be happy so you had us split up!? That doesn’t make any damned sense.”

“It doesn’t because you don’t know the whole story. The one I thought he’d tell you.”

“What whole story?”

Ash took a deep breath before continuing. “I’m dying.”

Bianca gasped. “What?”

“Monday when I went to Furrstown, it was to see a doctor there about some blood tests. I’m sick. Diseased. It’s going to kill me and there’s nothing anyone can do about it. Not you, not me and certainly not Brydak.”

“But, I still don’t understand.”

“The doctor told me that I could give it to my mate, or even pass it to any children I might have had with you. The point is, I’m leaving you so that you don’t have to watch me die or have to worry about whether or not any of your own kids have the disease and if they’re gonna die as well. Consider this the last request of a dying fox, find a mate that will love you like I did and isn’t gonna drop dead at any moment. Be happy and have a dozen kids, name one after me if you want to.”

Bianca stared at Ash in silence for a moment or two, then spoke. “That’s why you passed out at the gathering the other night?”



## BURNING ASH

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me then!?” Bianca hit Ash in the chest with both her paws. “Why not tell me yourself?”

Ash did not respond. Bianca kept hitting him and hitting him. Ash watched her for a minute then grabbed her wrists and tried to stop her. She kept pulling away and striking him repeatedly. Not really understanding why he did it, Ash swatted away her paw on the next volley and seized her throat and pushed her against the wall. She stopped swinging her paws and looked at Ash. He was breathing hard and there were tears running from his eyes. No, they were not tears. Blood had begun to run from his eyes once again. Sweat pouring down his face, Ash slowly released her neck and took a step back. His coat had fallen open and Bianca saw the large bloodstain on his shirt. Her immediate thought was that she had wounded Ash while she had been attacking him. *I didn’t hit that hard.* The blood also did not look fresh enough to have been spilled on the shirt in the last few minutes.

“Ash, whose blood is that?”

Ash pulled the coat away and looked at the blood. “My mother’s.”

“Oh my God! Is she all right.” Ash shook his head in the negative. “My God, I’m sorry.”

“Thanks. I have to go. I’ll talk to you later.”

“There’s a gathering Friday night.”

Ash waved to her as he walked towards the elevator. He pressed the button and waited for the cart to arrive. There was the typical ding as the cart stopped and the doors slid apart. Inside the elevator, Kellen and the badger called Jason Cain were standing at the back in either corner. When Ash stepped in, both furs looked at him with two very confused stares. Ash

## BURNING ASH

turned his back to them and pressed the button for the lobby. Ash reached up and rubbed his eyes. When he pulled his paw away, he saw the blood on his fingers. *That explains the looks.* Lost in thought, Ash missed the second glances shared by the two other occupants. Cain pulled a syringe from his inside coat pocket. He pulled the plastic cap off the needle and got ready. Kellen nodded once then moved closer to take hold of Ash. Cain would not need the needle. At that moment, Ash's eye rolled back in his head and he collapsed to the floor. Kellen and Cain exchanged another confused stare.

“What the hell just happened?”

“I didn't even stick him.”

“Let's get him to the others.”

\* \* \*

“*WHAT* the hell did you do to him!?”

“Nothing! We were just about to drug him when he dropped.”

“He had blood running from his eyes when he got on the elevator.”

“Is that how you explain the blood all over his shirt?”

“We didn't do that!”

“All right, all right. Just get him in the chair and get Z in here.”

Kellen and Cain lifted Ash from the floor and placed him in the indicated chair. Cain secured Ash's wrists and ankles to the chair then began striking Ash lightly across the face to wake him up. Ash opened his eyes and looked around the room he was in. There were two furs in the room, but he had heard Kellen's voice. And, there had been mention of another fur by the

## BURNING ASH

name of 'Z'. This mysterious Z had to be fetched, and when he, or she, arrived Ash would be outnumbered four to one. In his weakened condition, Ash was unsure he could even take one of them. Especially if that one was either Kellen or the badger Jason Cain. The other fur still in the room was too far in the shadows for Ash to see them, but he had heard the voice. Her voice. *Calleigh*. She walked out of her dark corner and came where Ash could see her face. There was a black semi-automatic pistol clutched in her right paw. She bent over and pressed the end of the barrel up under Ash's chin.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't put you out of your misery right now?"

Ash had not the strength to answer her, nor a good enough reason she might believe, so he continued to stare blankly back into her eyes. The door opened again and Kellen returned pushing a wheelchair in front of him. In the chair, there was the hunched over form of the fourth fur called 'Z'. *Calleigh* stood up and moved out of the way so Kellen could wheel the fur in position in front of Ash. All the breath left the fox's already aching lungs as he saw the face of the wheelchair-bound fur. *Zach!* Ash studied the expressionless face of the wolf. His blue eyes were pale and unfocused; his lips quivered continuously as if he were trying to speak but could not form the words. Ash's eyes drifted downward and stopped at his neck. There was a large scar on his neck that spread from one side just under the cheekbone to the same point on the opposite side. Ash looked over the rest of *Zach*. Everything else seemed to be fine. *Why the wheelchair?* *Calleigh* walked around to stand behind *Zach*.

"See what you did to my brother, you bastard?" Her words cut like a knife. "Son of a bitch! You walked into our house while he was alone. You tried to strangle him, but we came home in time. We saved him, but before you left, you cracked me over the head with a lamp.

## BURNING ASH

The doctor's told my father that you broke my temporal bone giving me profound traumatic deafness. Ring any bells?"

"Calleigh. Can we get on with this?" Cain's voice was low, but he was standing directly in front of Calleigh. "Somefur's bound to miss him sooner or later."

"All right." Calleigh's voice became softer and lost its acid edge. "Zach. We need you to do what you do best. Give us this son of a bitch."

She pushed Zach a bit closer to Ash. Zach reached out with his right paw and touched Ash's arm. All the color suddenly returned to Zach's eyes as they focused and locked with Ash's own bright blue eyes. The muscles in Ash's body began to tense up or to spasm. Calleigh leaned in, grinning.

"Do you feel that? That's all the pain you've ever inflicted on anyfur. My brother here is searching your mind trying to see if you really are pure evil, or if you're just a pawn. Fursonally, I'd prefer that you were pure evil. That way I could just put a bullet in your head now and dump your body in some dark alley. I would really love to do that. Or, maybe I'll strangle you, like you did..."

Calleigh's voice disappeared along with the rest of the room and it's occupants. The room was replaced by the living room in the Sommers' residence. Ash was standing in the corner watching a very healthy Zach sitting in a chair reading a book. From the doorway behind Zach, a figure walked out of the shadows. The light from the lamp illuminated the fur's face. *Oh God!* The fur was Ash. This Ash was dressed in dark trousers and wore a black turtleneck sweater. In his black-gloved paws, he held a wire garrote. Ash called out to Zach but the wolf did not hear his words. The fox's mouth opened as he raised the wire. Ash barely heard what was said.

## BURNING ASH

*'I'm sorry.'*

The wolf seemed to hear the apology and leapt from the chair, dropping his book, and spinning to face his would-be assassin. The fox dropped the wire and lunged at Zach, his gloved paws wrapping around the wolf's throat. The two tumbled over backwards, Ash landing on top of Zach. The wolf threw his attacker off of him and got to his hindpaws. Ash scrambled up and jumped at the wolf, once again seizing his neck. They fell again, this time towards the chair that Zach had been sitting in only moments before. The arm of the chair crashed into the small of Zach's back, producing a very audible cracking sound. Ash's legs suddenly went numb and he was watching the rest of the horrible scene from the floor. The killer was thrown off Zach by the sudden impact. He reached around and seized the wire and wrapped it around the wolf's throat and pulled it tight, cutting it into the fur and skin. The killer continued tightening the wire around his victim's throat until the sound of the door opening and closing intruded on his concentration. He let go and spun around, a tear falling from his left eye and ran down his cheek.

*A tear! Not sweat!*

The fox assassin leapt silently over the back of the couch and grabbed a lamp off the end table. This lamp was not turned on, so no movement was sprayed across the walls in dark shadows. Two voices drifted into the room from the entranceway. *Calleigh and Cole!* They were laughing and talking about what could have been a movie they had just gotten back from. They walked into the room, but could not see Zach as he was lying on the floor. Calleigh came close enough to see her brother first. The lamp came crashing down on her head from out of the darkness. She fell away, striking her head again on the corner of the table where the lamp had been. Cole stepped in, but the worst he got was a roundhouse kick to his solar plexus. The kick

## BURNING ASH

sent him stumbling back into the entrance hall and crashing to the floor. Calleigh looked up into Ash's double's eyes, tears in her own, as blood ran from her head wound. Ash watched from the floor as his double ran out the door. His head was pounding and his abdomen felt like he had been.... *Kicked?*

The room jumped and Ash was back in the chair with Zach in front of him. His head was still pounding, but the pain had changed. It was not the excruciating pain of being hit with a blunt instrument, but the incessant throbbing pain of a terrible headache. The room lurched again and disappeared to be replaced this time by a dark room lit only by numerous glowing candles. Brydak was kneeling on the floor, looking over an object covered with a black shroud. A tired looking Ash stood over both Brydak and the object. Brydak raised his head to look at Ash and spoke, the words seemingly coming from a distance.

*'You understand the risk involved in this process? He may not wake up as the fur you once knew.'*

*'I understand, my lord. And, I don't care. I just want him back. After what I did to those three wolves, I don't think I could live with myself if it weren't for the chance to put my family back together. It was just supposed to be the guy and I'd never have to see his face, but then that girl and her brother walked in. She looked me in the eyes. I'll never forget the sadness and hatred in her eyes. Please, my lord, you have to do this! Please?'*

*'All right, my boy. But, I am going to have to ask you to leave the room during the procedure. It might not be a bad idea to leave Clawson just for tonight.'*

*'As you wish, my lord.'*

Ash stood in the shadows and watched the two conspirators. Ash watched himself bow to the demon lord then rise and walk from the room. He wanted to stay and see what was going

## BURNING ASH

to happen, but he was jerked from the room. He found himself sailing down the highway, flying just inches to the right of the other him on his bicycle. *This is Friday night.* Words began to drift towards Ash's ears. His other self was talking to himself, and even though the wind was whipping past him, he could hear every word clearly.

*'Maybe I should just apologize? Right, I can see it now. I walk up to the door, knock and say, Hi I tried to kill you and you brother, but I'm really sorry. The next thing I'd hear would either be a slamming door or a gunshot. No, that would definitely be suicidal. But, I have to tell them everything. About my deal with Brydak and about Micah. Sorry, Micah, looks like we'll have to wait a while longer to see each other.'*

By the time he had finished his monologue, Ash and his double were in front of the house Ash knew only too well by now. Ash watched this strange doppelganger as he tried to decide what he should do next. The light breeze that had been blowing began to strengthen. A sudden gust of wind and Ash was watching his other self tumbling to the ground. His head hit the sidewalk hard, the skin splitting open spilling blood onto the white, pristine snow. The fox sat up and touched his forehead gingerly then pulled his paw back to look at the blood. As he was looking at his paw, his eyes widened in horror as the paw began to dissolve and disappear. The rest of him followed suit, but was immediately returned to its original state. But, only physically. The reconstituted fox now looked more confused than scared. *Oh my God! That's me.* The thought exploded into Ash's mind just as a car came around the corner and came to a screeching halt in front of the both of them. Mr. Sommers jumped out of the car and ran to see about the fox on the ground. In the process of approaching him, the wolf stepped right through Ash as he watched the scene. Sommers started calling out to the house.

*'Just call the paramedics! Son? Are you all right? Help's on the way. You're gonna...'*

## *BURNING ASH*

The words faded as the scene jumped again, this time straight to a hospital bed. Ash stood over the unconscious form of himself as he convalesced in Furrtown Medical Center. The doctors and nurses came and went. They moved with an unnatural speed, as if watching a movie in fast forward. Everything suddenly slowed and came to a halt; time resuming as normal. Ash listened to the rhythmic sound of the hospital machines and wondered why he was seeing this. The next second, he found his answer. A shooting pain appeared in his right leg, right arm and his throat. The pains were crippling. He lost feeling in his arm and leg and fell to the floor, supporting himself on his left arm. He could not breathe and that's when it happened. The room jumped. In rapid succession, Ash was shown the deaths of his father and brother in the car. Then their deaths at the paws of Kordak in a history long since made immaterial.

He saw his own apparent death while escaping from the realm belonging to the demon Clothor. He was forced to watch himself moving through that barn in the human world as he destroyed every vampire that lived there. With each vampire that was destroyed, Ash's own body felt like it was going to explode from the overwhelming pain. He was then subjected to the sight of his mother's contorted figure on the lawn of his house, then again to the bleeding puncture in her abdomen from just a few hours ago. Ash cried out and tried to fight against the images. He needed to escape the horrid display of nightmarish images that kept cropping up to eat away at his mind. As he fought, Ash began to feel the abrasive leather of the restraints tugging at his wrists. The terrible remembrances began to fade. The eerily focused face of Zach Sommers shimmered into view. The three dark shapes that were the onlookers could be seen pacing around the room, stopping occasionally to listen to Ash's involuntary whimpering. From what Ash could glimpse of their faces, the badger called Cain seemed to be the most disturbed by the sounds and pained motions coming from Ash.



## BURNING ASH

“Stop.” The word came slowly and took all his strength. “Please, stop. Please.”

“God, Zach. Stop it! You’re killing him!” The badger’s voice was choked, frightened.

Ash looked up into Zach’s eyes. Ash could feel the tears and sweat running down his face. What he did not know was that the tears were mixed with blood that had once again began to flow from his eyes. Blood also poured from his nose and ears. Zach’s paw jerked back from its place on Ash’s arm and the images ceased immediately. Ash slumped back in the chair and tried to breathe steadily. Calleigh walked to Zach and pulled the wheelchair back so she could stare into his eyes. There was sweat running through the fur on his face as well. Kellen and Jason moved to check on Ash, the latter performing that task of checking his pulse. It was racing! Ash could hear the thumping of his heart in his bleeding ears, the rhythmic pounding no longer holding to the rhythm it should have. *I’m dying. Always dying, but never actually getting there.* Cain reached down and began loosening the straps on his wrists, but Calleigh stopped him with a look from her fire-filled eyes.

“What did you see, Zach?” Her brother’s paw in her own. “Why did he try to kill you?”

“His demon lord asked him to. He made a deal with the demon Kordak to see his deceased brother again; my life was the price. I heard him say he was sorry. He had no choice.”

“But, what had you so scared?”

“I saw the death of his father and brother in a violent car accident. I also saw the death of his father and brother at the paws of the demon Kordak. I watched his mother die during the Mystic Wars and then saw her pierced body from early this very day. I saw his imprisonment in a glass cell, being scrutinized by strange, fleshy beings. I marveled at his ability to defeat dozens of vampires and monstrous creatures single-pawedly while others looked on. I saw him training in a forest with you, Cole and myself along with the leopard detective back in Furrstown. I

## *BURNING ASH*

watched him die in another world then wake up and meet you in high school. For the second time.”

“What are you saying?”

“He has so many memories. Most conflicting with others in either time or place, some just seem improbable, but they are all very real. The mind cannot create three separate lifetimes worth of memories unless the mind had lived three separate lives.”

“Three separate lives? Listen, Z, I’ll believe anything you say, but this is completely crazy! How could this fox have lived three separate lives?” Kellen’s voice sounded very unconvinced.

“It is only possible with the use of a great deal of very powerful magic. There are no sorcerers or witches alive today with the level of power. If there were, I would be able to sense them and they could help us. No, he could not have harmed you and I, because this Ash was watching a movie with you, his brother and his girlfriend at the same time on the same day.”

Ash began coughing. The sudden outburst of sound from Ash drew attention back to him. As he coughed, blood started to trickle from the corners of his mouth. Calleigh rose and walked behind her brother’s wheelchair and took the handles in her paws. She nodded to the other two furs then pushed Zach to the door and out of the room. Kellen and Jason then began to undo the restraints and help Ash from the chair to a cot in the corner. Kellen turned on another lamp as Cain began to wipe the blood from Ash’s face. Kellen left the room and came back with a basin of water and a glass, also filled with water. There was a folded rag sitting half in the water in the basin. Cain took the rag and began to clean away the blood that was too dry, or too stubborn, to be swept away by a dry pawkerchief. When he was done he handed the glass of

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water to Ash for him to take a drink. Ash raised the glass and took a long drink leaving the glass only half full. Lowering the glass, Ash swallowed the water and breathed deeply.

“What happened to you? Was it all that bad?” Cain’s voice was full of genuine concern.

“What do you mean?”

Kellen stepped forward. “He means that the last time a fur was brought here for questioning and bled that much, it was because Calleigh took a knife to them.”

“She’s done this before?”

“Yep, I still have the scars from that damned knife to prove it.” Kellen did not sound bitter as he admitted to being the previous victim he had mentioned.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I really am.”

“Y’know, I believe you. You really sound sincere.”

“That’s because I am.”

“I know. The Ash I’ve known since the seventh grade was too embittered by now to care for anyfur outside his own family. You seem the type to care about everyfur. Except maybe yourself in some circumstances.”

“Well, what can I say?”

“You two wanna be left alone for a while.” Jason’s voice was practically overflowing with sarcasm.

“No, we’re good.” Kellen crossed the room and picked up his coat.

Jason looked back at Ash. “If it helps, you’re in an apartment building on the east side of town. There’s a car downstairs that you can take wherever you wanna go. I also brought you a change of clothes. We weren’t sure if she was gonna cut you or just slap you around a bit. Okay?”

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“Thanks.”

“There’s a shower in there if you want one. Well, I gotta run. See ya ‘round.”

As the badger let himself out, Ash rose from the cot and examined the clothes on the table. The clothes included a white short sleeve shirt, a dark green turtleneck sweater and a pair of dark blue jeans. Kellen left the room long enough for Ash to change out of his own clothes. The first thing he did was to grab the collar around his neck and tear it off. He removed the gold medallion and placed it on the table. Ash unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off. The white shirt, mostly red in the front from his mother’s blood. Ash looked down and saw a patch of dried blood on his stomach. The blood had soaked through the weave of the shirt and stained his fur. Ash walked to the closed door and told the waiting lizard that he was going to take a shower. The muffled response came from the other side and Ash walked into the bathroom and turned on the water. He peeled off the rest of his clothes and stepped under the warm, flowing water. He stayed only long enough to relax his mind and wash away the blood. He turned off the water, got out and got dressed, stuffing the medallion in his pocket. Ash stepped out into the room where Kellen waited, pulling the green sweater over his head as he did. Kellen turned and handed him a brown, waist-length jacket that zipped up in the front and buttoned around the collar.

“Were do you go from here?” Kellen asked Ash the question, giving him a black woolen scarf as they walked out of the building.

“I’m going to go meet a few furiends of mine. You?”

“Home. Look, next week there’s gonna be a massive assault on every last demon and angel ruling us. I have to be there as part of the strike, but I was wondering if you could get Bianca out of there when everything goes to hell?”

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“Funny you should ask that. I was planning on pulling something this Friday. I was hoping you could make sure Bianca didn’t get hurt, when everything goes to hell, as you say.”

“What are you planning?”

“I don’t have a clue yet.” The two walked out of the building and Ash saw the car they had left for him. “Whoa!”

“You like?”

“What would possess you to give me a car like that?”

The large lizard merely shrugged. “Actually, it was a gift from Brydak. We figured you could drive it to his funeral.”



*JAKE* lay on the bed in the unlit nurse’s office of Furrstown High School. He was staring at the dark ceiling, breathing heavily. He was also completely naked. Jake looked down towards the foot of the and, though he did not actually see it, caught the tired glance of Cole. He was sitting on his knees between Jake’s legs, which were wrapped around Cole’s waist. Cole was also out of breath and his hips ached.

“That was great. How many does that make?” Jake grinned as he spoke.

“Let’s see. This is the first time today, third time since we’ve been hiding in the school and then there was that time back at your house. I believe that would give us a grand total of four times.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Okay, hold still.”

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“Why?”

“I have to pull it out.”

“Why?” The leopard’s whine was false. “Leave it in a little bit longer.”

“My legs are starting to cramp. I have got to stand up. Just, try not to move too much.”

“Okay, fine. We should probably get cleaned up and dressed anyway.”

“Yeah.”

Jake sat up in the bed as Cole got unsteadily to his hindpaws. He walked over to where his clothes were piled in the floor and grabbed his pair of boxer shorts. He had them halfway up his legs when the door opened and Cassie walked in. Jake grabbed the covers and pulled them up to hide himself. Cassie cried out in surprise and dropped the items she was carrying in her arms. Her left paw flew up to her face and shielded her eyes from the sight that had been revealed by the light coming in from the open door. She had seen so much more than she had wanted to see as she had entered.

“Jesus Christ! God, I had hoped never to see that much of either of you for as long as I lived. At least, now, I can die saying I’ve seen it all.”

“Good morning to you too, Cass.” Cole was snide, but not angry as he finished pulling on his underwear and tossed Jake his.

“What were you two doing in here, she asked knowing full well the kind of answer she’d be getting, but letting her curiosity get the better of her?”

“Why *do* you ask these questions?” Jake pulled on his own shorts underneath the covers.

“I’m a cat. Our curiosity is supposed to kill us, right? Just tell me when it’s over.”

The two lovers pulled on their pants. Cole looked back at Cassie. “It’s safe. You can look now.”

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“Thank God!”

“Why didn’t you knock?” Jake slipped on his shirt as he spoke.

“I did. Oh, we have a visitor. I didn’t see them drive up, but there’s no fur in the car and it’s a very nice car.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, c’mon.”

Cassie led the two males out of the nurse’s office and down the main hallway and into the principal’s office. She took them to the window and the three of them peered through the glass. Jake and Cole’s jaws nearly fell from their heads when they saw the automobile sitting in front of the school. The midnight blue paint of the two-door coupe reflected the morning sunlight into the onlookers’ eyes. The terrain the car was sitting on was also reflected in the gloss finish of the automobile. The coupe had 2+2 seating, meaning that the car would have room for two up front, plus two seats for occasional passengers in the rear. The silver hubcaps had been polished to the point where the three of them could have seen themselves just as well with a mirror. The entire car ran pretty low to the ground with the bumper mere centimeters from scraping pavement. Their eyes were pretty wide by this point; Jake was coming close to drooling. The windows were not tinted so they could see the beige leather interior of the grand tourer class automobile.

“That’s an awesome car. Can’t tell what kind it is.” Cole glanced at the other two as he spoke then back at the car.

“Yeah. It must have cost a pretty penny, though.” Jake leaned closer to the window.

“Actually, a few years of servitude and just a few hours of torture.”

The sudden intrusion of another voice into the conversation caused all three of them to swing around. Cassie stepped on Jake’s tale as she turned. He jumped, yanking his tail from

## BURNING ASH

under her shoe, his arm flailing out and knocking Cole into the wall and then to the floor. Cassie started to fall and seized Jake's arm on the way down, pulling him down with her. The three of them crashed to the floor with a loud thud. Ash raised his eyebrows and looked down at his three friends. He shook his head then helped them each to their hindpaws. They looked at each other with eyes wide, all wondering the same thing. *How the hell did he get in here?* Ash took a couple steps back and watched as his friends dusted themselves off and smiled. Jake pulled his tail around and set about seeing if it had been broken. Cole rubbed the back of his head where it had made contact with the wall. Cassie was rubbing her legs where Jake had crashed landed on a minute or so before. When they were satisfied that they were going to survive the ordeal, they turned to Ash. Questions began pouring from their open mouths. Ash held up his paws in a plea for them to stop. They did.

"Well, hello to you three too." The three furs looked at each other, confused. Ash sighed. "Let me just say. It's great to see you guys again. It's been too long."

"Way too long." Cassie jumped at Ash and threw her arms around his neck and hugged him.

"Down girl. Down." Cassie let go and Ash turned to Jake and Cole. "What have you two been doing this whole time?"

Cole and Jake exchanged mischievous glances. Cassie groaned and clapped her paws over ears. The reply came from both males, simultaneously. "Each other."

Cassie turned and hit Ash hard in the chest. "Why did you have to ask them that?"

"Sorry. How have you been holding up, Cass?"

"Well, besides having lived in an X-rated movie since about eleven o'clock Tuesday night, I'm doin' just great."



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Ash looked over at Cole and Jake. They were standing side by side, each with an arm wrapped around the other's waist. They were grinning from ear to ear. "Oh my God. You didn't?" They continued to grin. "You did!"

"Four times." Jake offered the information without hesitation.

"Huh?"

"That's how many times we did it. Four."

"My God! Did I absolutely need to know that?"

The four of them laughed for a few minutes after this question. They began to quiet down as a myriad of questions began floating in and out of their minds. What's been going on? What happens next? Who else is there? Who did this to us?

"How's Micah?" Cassie's question shattered the silence of the room.

Ash looked back at her and spoke. "He's not with us."

"Like my father." Cassie's voice was low and sorrowful.

"No, not like your father." Ash shook his head as he lowered his eyes to the floor.

"Oh my God." Jake's voice was barely over a whisper.

"He's dead?"

Ash rose from the chair and crossed to the window. "Wouldn't be the first time." Ash wished he had not opened his mouth the moment the words passed his lips.

"What the hell does that mean?" Cassie jumped from her own chair and rushed to Ash and turned him towards her. "Well?" She slapped him across the muzzle when he did not answer her. "Goddamn it, answer me?"

"Look, when we get back it won't matter a whole hell of a lot. Micah is alive and well back home."

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“About that.” Cole broke in to change the subject. “How are we gonna get out of here?”

The question brought to Ash the sudden realization that he had no way of getting them home. He had not even given any thought to how because of all that had happened up to this point. Ash wanted to kick himself for promising to get his friends home only to have to tell them that that might never happen. Instead of telling them he had no clue, Ash closed his eyes and began to think. Ash’s mind traveled backwards, searching for an answer. Kordak was the most likely candidate for son-of-a-bitch of the millennium and the only creature alive that hated Ash enough to do this to him. *Kordak also poisoned this body and had ordered me...HIM!... to kill Zach.* But, were the two Kordak’s one and the same? Would it do them any good to kill the Kordak in this world? *It’d sure as hell make me feel better.*

“We have to kill Kordak.” The statement was not put forth to be argued over. “If he did this to us then maybe by killing him everything will return to normal. There’s only one problem with this plan.”

“What the fuck could be wrong with it? It’s beautiful.” Cole’s ears were sticking straight up.

“Can you take on a demon with his powers and even hope to die slowly? I can’t. Not like this.”

“Well, we may be able to fix that.” Jake ran from the room.

“What was that about?”

Jake came toddling back into the room with a book held open in his left paw, flipping pages with his right. He began to slow down and finally stopped once he had found what he was looking for. He gave the book to Ash and took a step back. Jake spoke as Ash looked over the open pages.

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“This is a bonding ritual we can use to rejoin you and Un. You’ll be your old self. Just like new. All that kinda stuff. Well? What do you think?”

“I think it could work. But, there’s still a problem. Un’s dead. Or, at least this world’s Un is dead.”

“Oh.” Jake’s ears fell at the revelation. “Are you sure?”

“I have memories of being told that he was dead, yes.”

“Maybe there’s a way to call the Un from our world?” Cassie spoke these words to try and cheer Jake up more than anything.

“Maybe. Come with me, Cass.”

Jake grabbed the book from Ash, took Cassie’s paw and the two of them rushed out of the office again. Cole and Ash were left alone. Ash turned back to the window and resumed staring out across the snow-covered courtyard. He could not keep thoughts of Calleigh from flashing through his mind. The images alternated between her smiling face and perfect body and scenes of her lying on the ground with her head split open and blood running everywhere. Then a third image flashed into view. An image he had not seen nor thought about in two years because it happened in another lifetime. Her eyes were wide in fear and there was a paw clutched around her throat. *Wait!* Something was wrong with the image. It had been Halloween that day and Calleigh had been wearing a dress and her hair was up. The image in his mind, Calleigh’s hair was falling around her shoulders. No determinations on clothes could be made. But the most glaring of differences were in the paw around her throat. The fur was not the dark grey color that was evidence by Kordak’s control, but it was the dark-brown-almost-black color of Ash’s own paw. This same dark-brown-almost-black colored fur traveled up his lower arm where it abruptly ended a few inches from his elbow and became the deep orange fur that

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covered the majority of the rest of his body. *My arm!* A trick, maybe. A paw suddenly landed on his shoulder, jolting him back to reality.

“Hey? You all right?” Cole scrutinized Ash’s face.

“What? Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Liar.”

“Jerk.”

“Bitch.”

“Ow, that hurt. All right. You win.”

“Yes!” Cole’s smile was wide then it began to fade. “Look. I wanted to ask if you figured out why Calleigh was after you the way she was?”

“You mean, you don’t remember? What about the whole sign language thing.”

“Aside from remembering what I was doing right before all this happened, no. I’ve been guessing my way through the week. So’s Jake and Cass. It’s easier for Cassie. She apparently had taken drama classes in high school and we didn’t. As for the sign language, I learned that long before we first met you. There was a girl that lived in the house you live in now and she was deaf. Calleigh and I were like her only friends.”

“Okay, but that still doesn’t make any sense.”

“How come?”

“Well, you say you don’t remember a thing from this life beyond two hours before the switch. I’ve been remembering a whole hell of a lot since day one. I meet furs from my life and every little detail of their lives I should know, I know. Feels like my heads gonna explode. Everything that could keep me from getting killed, every answer I should have to any question that could be asked. It’s all there. And, I fuckin’ hate it! Damn it! I wish it would stop!”

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“Why you? Why not us, too?”

“I don’t know. I think we’ve gotten away from the original point of our conversation.”

“Yeah. You asked me if I remembered something. What was it?”

“You were there that night. I...he...kicked you into a wall. The screwy thing is that I saw that he was on his way to beg forgiveness when the switch was made. He had made a deal with Kordak and Zach’s life was the price. God knows why.”

Jake and Cassie came walking back into the room.

“We’ve got something, but I don’t like and won’t do it.”

\* \* \*

*ASH* raised his eyebrows at the leopard. Jake put the book on the table and began explaining the process that they could use to bring the Un from their world to this world. The original ritual required the placing of a circular array on the floor and nine candles would be placed around the circle and lit. Ash would then have to stand in the center of the array and wait while Jake read the incantation. It would not be that simple. Cassie, Cole and Jake would have to use a ceremonial knife to slice open their palms. They would then place their paws palm-down on the borders of the summoning circle.

“Doesn’t sound so bad.” Ash was starting to wonder what had Jake so scared.

“It gets worse.” Cassie lowered her head as she spoke.

Jake swallowed hard. What he would say next was very difficult for him. “We would then have to use those same knives to cut your wrists and slice your throat from ear to ear.”

“My God, why?” Cole jumped up from his chair.

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Jake opened his mouth to speak, but he choked. The words would not come out. He fell into a chair and dropped his head into his paws. Cassie walked over and squeezed his shoulder to comfort him. Cassie looked up and spoke.

“We figured out that the only way to bring an angelic being from one dimension to another was by sacrifice. If we did this and it worked, you wouldn’t have a thing to worry about. Un would just heal you and you’d be good as new. Better, even.”

“Let’s do it.”

“No, I told you. I won’t do it!” Jake rose quickly from the chair; the chair fell over backwards. “If it works, fine. But, if it doesn’t, you’re dead! Do you understand? You are fuckin’ dead! I won’t do that! I wouldn’t be able to live with that on my conscious. But, hell, you wanna kill yourself, be my guest. But, I won’t have anything to do with it.”

“Look, I understand your reservations, but we have to do this. So, fuck you and fuck your conscious!”

“We don’t have to fight. We could just go back to our families. Cassie’s got her father and a nice job at the hospital. Cole. You’ve still got you entire family, albeit a little worse for wear, but you still have them. And, my mother’s out there somewhere. I might go searching for her. I’d really like to see her again.”

“Jake, we can’t do that. We don’t belong here.”

“Why can’t we stay? Huh, tell me! Stay with your mother.”

“My mother’s dead! My stepfather’s dead! My father! Micah! They’re all dead! I’ve got no fucking family to go back to! I can’t stay here. I have nothing!”

“You’ve got us, Ash.” Cassie’s voice was calm as she interrupted.

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“I know. We have to get back home. We have to do this. No matter the cost.” Ash turned his back on Jake and others. His voice trailed off as his head began to pound, his heart to race.

“You could die if we do this!”

“I’m going to die if we don’t try!”

Ash spun around and grabbed Jake’s collar, thrusting him against the office wall. The back of Jake’s head smashed into one of the framed photographs on the office wall. Jake stared back at Ash’s face, his eyes wide in shock. Not shock over Ash’s outburst, but shock over the blood running from Ash’s right eye and nostril. Ash’s vision blurred. He let go of Jake and slumped against the wall next to Jake. Ash found himself struggling to breathe. Cassie got down on her knees beside Ash and wiped the blood from his face. Jake lowered himself to the floor as well and Cole left the office to get Ash a cup of water. When Cole returned, Jake and Cassie had moved Ash to the chair behind the desk and were sitting in two of the other three chairs, watching Ash. Cole gave him the plastic cup and then took the remaining seat. Ash drank the water from the cup slowly. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. The pounding in his skull vanished and Ash looked at his audience. They did not say anything. They did not have to. Their eyes said it all.

“I’m dying.”

“What?” The collective response of his three friends.

“Your father told me this past Monday when I came to town.”

“How bad is it?” Cole leaned forward in his chair.

“Days. Weeks. Months. I might not live out the year. Hell, I could die tomorrow.”

“My God.” Tears began to well up in Cassie’s eyes.

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“Now do you understand why we have to at least try? I would rather die trying to help the three of you. I don’t want some demonic virus killing me.”

“Demonic virus?” Cassie looked at Ash.

“I have reasons to believe Kordak did this to me. Reasons I’ll go into later. Jake?”

Jake sat in his chair and was silent. The only signs that he had not gone to sleep on them were his fierce-looking eyes and the constant motion of stroking his chin with his paw. Jake was thinking hard about all that Ash had just told them. It was maddening! The best among them killed by something as insignificant as a virus. *His blood could be on my paws, though. Shit!* Jake sighed and rose from the chair and crossed the room. He continued massaging his jaw as he paced the relatively large office. Ash knew that what he had said must have been hard for Jake to accept, but it was the truth. Jake suddenly stopped pacing and looked Ash dead in the eye.

“All right.”

“Great. How long do you need to set up?”

“One of us is gonna have to sneak out and get the candles we’ll need. We have to find a good place to do this and draw the array on the floor. Most importantly, we’ll need the knives. And, I’m liable to need a pack of cigarettes after this if it works.”

“It’ll work, Jake. It has too. Anything else?”

“Four nice large white jackets and a truck with thick, cushioned walls. We have got to be out of our goddamned minds.”

“We probably are, but that’s why this is going to work.” Ash smiled as he spoke.

“Your hilarious, you know that. Now, about those candles.”



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“I have a bunch of stuff at home in a chest. There might be some candles in there we can use.” Cassie paused for a moment to think. “My dad’s been after me to throw that crate out for a long time now.”

“I didn’t think the three of you could remember anything about this life?”

“We can’t. It’s just that I had had the argument with him right before the switch.”

“Great, we got candles. Now, how about those knives?”

“Is there a specific kind of knife you need?” Cole leaned back in the chair, his paws clasped in his lap.

“Athames. Three of them. Other than that, as long as they’re sharp, they’ll do.”

“Right. And where would we find such knives?”

“There’s a new Wiccan store downtown. They sell that kind of stuff.” All eyes went to Cassie when she spoke. Cassie looked back at them and answered their silent question. “I passed it in town Sunday afternoon and went in to look around. What? I was bored and it looked interesting.”

“It doesn’t matter. Do you remember the address?” Ash rose from the chair.

“Yes.”

“Good. Write it down for me. I’ll head out there and get the athames. Cole, you or Jake, one, go with Cass to her house and help her throw out her trunk. Any arguments?”

“No arguments, but we do have a slight problem. You may have a car, but we don’t.”

“Well, how the hell did you get here?”

“Oh, we drove, but the car’s probably been reported as stolen.”

“Was it?”

“No, it was my father’s and he wasn’t using it.”

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Ash leaned against the desk to think. He turned his head and glanced out the window. He saw the two-door coupe and then thought about the fur that had given to him. Jason Cain had seemed like the kind of fur that would plan for several different eventualities. *Probably comes from reading too many books.* Ash moved to the window and looked out.

“I wonder.”

“Wonder what?”

“I’ll be right back.”

Ash left the office and turned right at the door. Cassie and the other two crowded at the window and watched the car. Ash appeared, walking towards the car. He pulled the keys from his pocket and moved to the trunk. He opened it and began riffling around, looking for something. He found it. He pulled a black duffel bag from the trunk and walked back towards the school. In another minute or so, Ash was back in the office with the duffel bag in paw. He placed the duffel on the desk and opened it. Reaching in the bag, Ash pulled out several license plates and laid them on the desk. He pulled a tool from the bag and then stood back.

“Take your pick.”

“Where did you get all of these?” Jake started sifting through the plates.

“The guy that gave me the car must have been one paranoid bastard. You can use this to switch the license plates. All right. I’ll go get those knives; you guys get the candles. Meet back here in an hour. Allowing for traffic and haggling parents.”

“Oh, speaking of haggling.” Cassie followed Ash out into the hall. “When you get the knives, paw however much they say. You might draw attention to yourself if you don’t. Wiccans never haggle over the prices of new ritual tools.”

“I’ll take your word for it. See you in an hour.”

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Ash left the school and got in the car Cain had left him. He turned the key in the ignition and pulled out into the street. Turning right, Ash headed for downtown Furrstown and the Wiccan store where he would purchase the blades they would use. Traffic was light on the way into town, but finding a place to park once in town was another matter. Ash drove past the store twice looking for a spot, but found none near the store. He ended up parking down the street and around the corner on the other side. He got out of the car and locked the doors. Ash walked with the crowd and crossed the street where he turned and walked back towards the Wiccan store. The façade of the store was decorated with numerous symbols, most notably the circle with a five-pointed star inscribed in it. The Pentagram. Ash sighed and pulled open the door and stepped into the strange store. Another customer, a female chipmunk, brushed past him as he entered. Barely noticing her, Ash looked all around him as he walked further into the store. He was surprised at some of the items hanging from the walls and the ceiling. There was a small rack with an assortment of pendants and necklaces hanging from it. The clerk behind the register looked up from his magazine and smiled at Ash.

“Morning.” He seemed harmless to Ash.

“Good morning.”

“Something I can help you find?”

“I’m looking for athames.”

“Sure. Back wall.”

Ash nodded his appreciation and walked through the shelves and displays to the back wall. He stopped at the wall and looked it over. The back wall was indeed the area to look for an athame, let alone three. There were many knives of varying sizes, designs and prices. There was a small athame, about nine inches long, that the label stated had been carved from natural

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bone. Ash raised his eyebrows in skepticism and went back to looking for three athames that they could use. He looked until his blue eyes were stopped by the appearance of a very familiar symbol. Ash reached for the athame and pulled it from the wall to examine it closer. The double-edged, ten-inch blade had the symbol of Un on the top. Ash looked and there were two more with identical blades but different hilts. The one in his paw was black leather; the other two were brown wood and natural bone. Ash slid the blade back in its sheath and grabbed the other two athames from the wall, placing them in their sheathes as well. Ash walked to the register and placed the knives on the counter. The clerk eyed them then looked up at Ash.

“Find what you were looking for?”

“Like you wouldn’t believe.” Ash did not know why he said it, but the clerk let it slide.

“Why three? If you don’t mind my asking?”

“Of course, not. My girlfriend’s really into this kinda of thing and she’s got me interested.” *The hell are you saying!?* “She had a couple athame but they were stolen last week. So, I decided to buy her two more to replace those and I got her a third one for her birthday tomorrow.”

“Wow. Well, if she doesn’t love you now, she’ll sure as hell love you once she sees these.”

“Yeah. How much was it?”

“\$95.25. Plus tax... That’s \$100.01.”

“That’s not bad. Here you go.”

Ash handed the clerk the money, took the knives and left. He walked out of the store and went back to his car. He got in and placed the knives in the passenger seat beside him. He put the key in the ignition, but did not turn it. Ash looked over at the plain, brown paper bag. He

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opened it and pulled one of the athames out and removed the blade. He looked at the silver toned symbol on the blade. What were the odds of finding three athames, each with the symbol of the very angel they were trying to summon displayed on just above the hilt? *Worry about it later, I have to get back to the school.* A strange unfamiliar ringing interrupted his thoughts. Ash instinctively reached for his cell phone, but realized that the ringtone was not his. He started checking all of the pockets of the jacket Kellen and given him, but found no phone. He listened a moment then reached for the glove compartment. Ash pulled it open and saw the cell phone, the ringing now louder for the removal of the barrier. Ash lifted the phone and red the lighted display: "JASON CAIN".

He flipped it open and put it against his ear. "Hello?"

<Did I forget to mention the phone of the glove box?>

"Yeah, you did."

<Sorry.>

"Forget it. What's up?"

<I got some news and it isn't good. In fact, it's the worst fuckin' news you'll ever get.>

"I doubt that, but go ahead."

Cain relayed his information as Ash drove back to the high school. He tried putting the question over the knives out of his mind as he listened. The news Jason had was indeed disturbing. On a scale of one to ten, the news rated a "Holy shit!", which, needless to say, is quite bad. Jason finished talking, said goodbye and disconnected the call. Ash closed the phone and tossed it onto the passenger's seat. The phone hit the paper bag causing it to rustle. Ash now had two things to drive him mad. One was the coincidence of the nature of the knives and what they would be used for. The other was this new information given to him by the badger

## BURNING ASH

called Jason Cain. He decided he would not mention the news from Jason to Cassie and the others until after the ritual. *If I die, the whole deal's off anyway and it won't matter.* Ash turned the car into the school drive and parked it. He got out and walked into the school and back to the office.

Cassie, Cole and Jake were sitting around the desk planning cards, waiting for him. A large brown trunk sat opened in the far corner. Nine square-shaped black candles sat on the floor in front of the box. Cassie and Cole turned around in their chairs when Jake lifted his head. They all smiled when they saw him and Ash returned the smile. Their eyes moved to the paper bag as Ash neared the desk. He reached inside and pulled out the knives one at a time. He gave one athame to each of them then threw the bag in the trashcan. Ash walked over and sat in the only remaining chair. Jake and the others removed the athames from the sheathes and examined them. Cole was the first to turned the blade over and see the symbol. Cassie and Jake saw the symbol on Cole's then turned their own knives over. The three of them locked eyes for a moment then looked at Ash.

“Did you see this?” Jake asked the question slowly.

“Of course, I saw them. I bought them, didn't I?” Ash rubbed his neck. He had not slept the night before and it was catching up to him. “That's actually the reason I did buy those particular knives. It was too big a coincidence for me to ignore.”

“Yeah, but was it a good coincidence or a bad one?” Cole still did not seem convinced.

“Look, they're just three knives that we needed for a summoning ritual. Maybe having the symbol on the blades will make this easier.”

*BURNING ASH*

“He’s right, actually.” Cassie looked back at the knife in her paws. “If someone placed these particular knives there for Ash to find, then they’re our friend, not our enemy. It’s not guaranteed, but it will make it easier.”

“We still doing this?” Cole looked around at Jake.

“Yeah. We’ll do it in the gym.”

“When?”

“Tonight.”

*END PART 2*