

BURNING ASH

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

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

PART 3

ASH stood by and waited for Jake's instructions. He had been told to take off all of his clothes except his underwear. So, there Ash was. The gym was cold and he was wearing nothing but a pair of cotton shorts. Cassie and Cole sat on the gym floor, drawing the large array that Ash would have to lay down in. He looked over at Jake, who was leaning over a table they had brought in to hold their tools.

"I might as well be naked, you bastard." Ash added the last bit with humor in his voice.

"Well, I figured Cassie had seen enough of that kind of thing for one day." Jake grinned widely as he spoke.

"Oh, how very thoughtful of you." Cassie looked up from her place on the floor. "I wish you'd have been this considerate earlier."

Ash sighed and folded his arms across his chest. He had to fight the urge to lean against the wall of the gym, which was no doubt cold then the floor was under his bare hindpaws. Cole got up from the floor and walked to the table. He grabbed three of the black candles and carried them back to the array. He began setting them around the perimeter of the array then walked back and got three more. Cassie came over and took the remaining three candles from the table. After she had placed them on the floor, Cassie touched up parts of the circle and lit the nine

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candles. Cole walked back over to the table and stood beside Jake. The two of them began talking in hushed voices. Cassie walked over to Ash and stood beside him.

“How are you doing?” She touched his arm lightly.

“Well, I’d rather have some clothes on, but I’m fine otherwise.”

“Good, well, ooh...” Cassie moved closer and put her arms around Ash and rested her head on his chest. Ash looked down at her in surprise.

“What are you doing?”

“You’re warm.”

“You say. I’m so cold, I could pass for a popsicle.”

“Well, you feel warm then.”

“Um, Cassie...”

“What’s wrong?”

“Oh, I don’t know. You’re my brother’s girl. And, I have a girlfuriend.” *A girlfuriend who was about to become something so much more.*

“Ahem.” Jake’s voice startled Cassie more than it did Ash. “You two wanna get started?”

“Yes.”

Ash answered as he started towards the array. Jake pulled Cole and Cassie around and told them where to sit. He gave them each a knife then sat himself down at Ash’s head. He had Ash extend his arms out, putting his wrists well within Cassie and Cole’s reach. Jake looked at the others and nodded. He then placed the blade on the palm of his left paw and drew it downwards, splitting open the padding on his paw. Blood spilled from his palm. Quickly, the three of them placed their paws palm-down on the parts of the array that had been designated for

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such. The blood began to pool under their paws as Jake gave the signal. Cole and Cassie, while holding their breath, stabbed the knives down into the midway point of Ash's lower arms and pulled the weapons towards them, cutting down towards them. Ash arced his head back to cry out and at that moment, Jake plunged his athame into Ash's carotid artery and drew the knife across his neck, severing the jugular vein in the process.

"I'm sorry."

Jake began saying the incantation under his breath. Blood came slowly from Ash's wrists, but massive amounts of blood kept flowing from the gaping wound in his neck. The moment his blood touched the lines of the array, the entire circle lit up. Jake did not look away from Ash's frightened eyes despite the bright blue rays of light trying very hard to blind him. His attention, as well as Cassie and Cole's, was diverted by the intrusion of the smell of burning flesh. Jake looked down at his paw and almost cried out in pain. The spot directly under his paw had turned white hot and was burning his palm. Simultaneously, all three of them pulled their paws from the floor and fell backwards. The circle continued to glow brightly, the light from where their paws had been reached higher than over the rest of the circle. Jake glanced down at his palm and saw the seared flesh of the pads. He looked quickly back to Ash and the glowing circle. The candles had gone out and the circle was glowing brighter and brighter. Just when it seemed the glow could not become any brighter, it vanished, leaving only the black lines and Ash.

"Ash!"

Jake scrambled forward, hoping to see Ash open his eyes and smile at him. Ash's eyes were indeed open, but there was no life in them. His blood no longer flowed from the wounds on his neck and wrists. There was no more blood left in his body to flow out. Ash Reynolds was

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dead. *And, I killed him.* Jake got up from the floor and walked to the table where the book rested. He placed both his paws down on the table and lowered his head. Cole got up too and walked to Jake. Cassie crawled closer to Ash and looked at him. Tears in her eyes, she reached up and lowered Ash's eyelids. Cassie kissed him on the cheek then started walking towards the two guys. The nine candles suddenly flamed to life. The sound startled the grieving furiends and they turned to look. The orange flames leapt from the candles and set the body of Ash Reynolds on fire. The fire quickly consumed the body and died away. All that was left were the large puddles of blood. Most belonged to Ash, but some of it belonged to the three of them. Jake looked away and turned back to the table.

"Fuck!" He clutched the side of the table and flipped it up and into the wall. "Goddamn it! I am so fucking stupid!"

"Jake, calm down." Cole grabbed Jake's shoulders, but the leopard pulled away.

"I let him talk me into this! Let you all talk me into this stupid fucking idea! And what do we have to show for it? Three bloody knives and one big fuckin' puddle of blood!"

Cole's right paw shot up and caught Jake hard across the face. "Get a hold of yourself!"

Jake stumbled back away from Cole and stared back at him, rubbing his jaw with one paw. Cassie gasped at the sight. She looked away from the two of them and saw that the candles had lit themselves once more. The wicks, however, were not topped by orange flames, but by blue orbs of roiling electricity. The electric crackling drew in the attentions of Jake and Cole. Bolts of lighting began arcing between the candles. The lines of the array began to glow again, this time very faintly. The three furiends watched as the large pool of blood began to bubble and move. The blood first started covering the individual line of the circle as if the lines were grooves in the floor. The electricity stopped arcing for a short time while the blood then began

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to pool together in the very center of the array. Nine bolts of lightning, one from each candle, rocketed up away from the floor then curved back down and struck in the center of the pool of blood.

The lightning subsided and all was silent. The blood began to bubble again. A portion of the blood began to rise and form a column of sorts that split out in five directions at the top. The blood resolved into a strangely rippling, blood red paw. The blood paw came down on the floor and was followed by the rest of the arm. Another paw emerged, followed closely by a shapeless head. Eventually the entire puddle of blood had risen to a standing position. The strange amorphous skin rippled and became a continuous coat of shining golden fur. The fur covered a very muscular frame and nine flopping tails. Two large wings grew from the fur's back. The feathers on the wings were the same golden hue as the fur. The head was that of a fox, but the ears were longer than the ears of most foxes. The fox's eyes opened and were revealed to be blue in color, with a glow coming from behind them that was unlike anything in this world or any other. The fox smiled at Cassie, Cole and Jake and nodded. Eight of its tails vanished as well as the two wings. The ears shrank to normal size and fur rippled again. The golden hairs became the deep orange, cream and dark-brown-almost-black colors of a normal fox's coat. The eyes stopped glowing and closed. Ash fell forward onto his knees.

Jake and Cole ran to check on him while Cassie grabbed a blanket from the football coach's office. She brought the blanket back and threw it around Ash's shoulders. He looked up her and the other two and smiled. He began to laugh. Ash rocked back into a more comfortable sitting position and continued laughing. He looked over his body as he laughed. Ash looked back at the dumfounded looks he was getting.

“What a ride?” The others began to laugh as well.

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“We thought you were dead!” Cassie said throwing her arms around Ash’s neck.

“Well, I think I was, but I can’t be sure.” He looked at Cole where his eyes were drawn to the nickel-plated gun lying on the floor next to his paw. “And what, may I ask, is that for?”

“Huh?” Cole looked down and saw the gun. He had not even noticed that he had pulled it out. “I’m not really sure.”

“Help me up, would you?”

Jake and Cole pulled Ash up from the floor and steadied him. Once he was sure he could walk on his own, Ash went into the locker room and put his clothes back on. He came back out as he finished pulling on the green sweater. He found Jake and the others in the middle of cleaning up the mess they might have made. To their great and welcomed surprise, they found no traces of blood anywhere on the floor or on the three athames. They merely had to wipe away the lines of the array and clean up the wax that had run onto the floor. Ash picked up the table and righted it. He put the book back on the table and flipped through it a couple of times. Jake walked over with the knives to place them back in their sheathes. He glanced over at Ash and smiled. Ash looked up at him and smiled back.

“You know, we could have summoned this big fire-breathing dragon here on...”

“Page 12. Yeah, I know, but we would have need to light almost five hundred candles for it to work.”

“Oh. Missed that part. Wait a minute, how did you know what page it was on?”

“I found that earlier in the week when Cole first told me you and Un had been separated. But, now that the two of you are together again, I guess I can hold to the promise I made.”

“What promise was...?”

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Jake took Ash's head in his paws and drew him in for a deep kiss. Cole and Cassie gasped at the sight then started laughing. Ash's eyes were wide in surprise. Jake's were closed as he leaned into the kiss. Ash pushed Jake away and jumped back.

“What the hell was that for!?”

“I told Cole Tuesday that when I saw those wings and your blue eyes, I was going to kiss you till you turned so red you can see it through the fur on your face. My exact words, I believe.”

“They are.” Cole said in the middle of a fit of laughter.

“If you'll all excuse me, I think I'm gonna be sick.” Cassie got up from the floor and started to the hallway.

“Me, too.”

Ash turned and followed her towards the door. A searing pain on his back caused him to freeze. He stifled a scream and hunched forward. Cole and Jake ran to him. Cassie stepped back into the gym. The pain had disappeared just as they got to him. He straightened up and looked around at the other three. Ash expected there to be a lighter, more constant pain following the initial shock, but there was none. The pain was there one second and gone the next. Ash pulled off the sweater and Jake lifted up the back of his shirt. There was a symbol that seemed to have been seared into the fur on his back. The symbol was comprised of three interlocking triangles. The shared portion, which was a smaller triangle, was in the center of his back with two pointing straight up towards his shoulders and the base of the third at the small of his back, just above his tail. There was a large circle that was set with its center in the middle of the shared area. Cassie walked around and looked at the symbol. She reached up and ran her paw along one of the outermost lines. Ash jumped as chills ran up his spine.

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“Hey, hey! Don’t do that. That tickles.”

“What the hell is that?”

“You mean, you don’t know?” Cole raised his eyebrows.

“Well, I never claimed to know everything. I think I’ve seen it before, but I don’t know what it is. Oh, wait, now I remember.”

“C’mon Cass, the suspense is killing us.” Jake’s voice came from just to Ash’s left.

“It’s called a trispiritum. I can’t remember what it means though.”

“That’s very fascinating. Can I put my sweater back on now?”

“Sure.”

“Thanks. Okay, just remembered, we have to talk. It’s really important.”

The group went back to the office so they could sit down and Ash told them what Cain had told him over the phone.

“At all the gatherings, Kordak has us wear brown robes. Some of the robes have different designs around the hemming to set the wearer apart from the rest. There is a group whose robes have black hems. Cain told me that the furs wearing these are essentially trained soldiers.”

“Perfect.” Ash let Jake’s interruption slide.

“He said that each of them carries a submachine gun with five extra 50-round detachable box magazines and two semi-automatic pistols with four clips of 10 .45 ACP rounds each. I hope you guys are getting this, because I have no idea what the fuck any of this stuff means.”

“Basically, it means they’ve got a shit load of firepower and we’ve got you and three thirteen inch knives.” Cole seemed very sure about what he said.

“Any suggestions on what we could do to fix that?”

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Jake sat forward in his chair. “There’s a small arsenal back at my house. But we might have a problem getting inside.”

“Why?”

Cole responded by pulling the gun he had had back out and placing it on the desk. “I shot Victor.”

“What? Why!?”

“It was either shoot me, or my dad.” Jake started to rise from his chair. “I, for one, am very glad he decided to shoot him and not me.”

“All right, calm down. So, you have guns back at your house. How about you, Cole? Any at yours?”

“Dunno. I’d have to go look.”

“That’d be easier than getting into Jake’s house apparently. Oh, and what the hell is a .45 ACP round.”

“Only the best bullets ever produced.”

“Comforting. Okay. How about I go with Jake to his house and we’ll see if we can get inside and the two of you can go to Cole’s house and poke around? Well?”

“All right. But tomorrow.” Cassie yawned as she spoke.

“Yeah, it’s too late to go out now. We’ll all get some sleep and go tomorrow. Whatever we do, we have to be in Clawson before 7:30 so we can attend the gathering and give Kordak what’s coming to him. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

The three of them rose from their chairs and left the office one at a time. Ash bade them good night and leaned back in the chair and put his hindpaws up on the desk. Ash clasped his

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paws behind his head and closed his eyes. It would be the best night's rest he had gotten the entire week. He would need all his strength and nerves for what was coming tomorrow.

Good night, Ash. Worry not about what is to come.

* * *

ASH sat against a wall across from a row of lockers. He had woken up early and got some exercise by running through the halls of the school. There had been no really horrible dreams during the night, just the recurring thought that he might have to face his resurrected father and brother in the coming fight. He had found a clean shirt and track shorts to wear during his exercise, but now he had washed off and put his clothes back on. He was staring at an area that covered eight of the double-stacked lockers. That had been the setting two years before in another world for his first run in with Calleigh Sommers. *I wonder if I'll ever see you again?* Ash's thoughts were cut off when Cassie appeared beside him. Her hair was wet and there was a damp towel in her paws. She smiled at Ash, but did not sit down beside him.

"What're thinking about?"

"I was just thinking about Calleigh and the first time I saw her. Well, the first time I ran into her, literally."

"Wow, graceful."

"Tell me about it."

"Was that you this morning? Running through the halls?"

"Yeah. Did I wake you? Sorry, if I did."

"No, I was already awake, I was just wondering how you felt afterwards?"

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“Perfect. My legs ached a little bit, but that was because I might have pushed myself a bit too hard. What about you? Why were you awake so early?”

“I couldn’t get those images of Cole and Jake out of my head. It was horrible.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well, I’m gonna run put this towel away and I’ll be back.”

Cassie walked around his stretched leg then down the hall and around the corner. Ash could hear the clicking of the claws on her toes on the floor of the hall grow quieter as she got further away. The sound of a door opening drifted down the hall followed by a surprised scream and then by Cassie’s voice. The words were distant, but understandable.

“My God! Not again! What is wrong with you two!?! When are you gonna learn to lock doors, or something!?! For God sakes!”

The clicking of her claws came back up the hallway and she appeared around the corner. She walked towards Ash and sat down beside him. The towel was still clutched in her paws, which were laying on her stretched out legs. Ash looked at her then back at the lockers across from him. Cassie did not look at him, but spoke.

“They’re busy right now. I’ll put the towel up later.”

Ash looked at Cassie. She looked back and the two of them started laughing. They laughed off and on for the next few minutes until there was no more humor left in her previous statements. They returned to their own thoughts and were silent for a long while. Ash’s thoughts turned back to Calleigh, while Cassie’s revolved around Micah. She could see his goofy face right before her eyes and it made her smile. What she had found most fascinating about Micah had been his golden eyes and his sense of humor. He had been the only boy she had ever met with eyes that color and she was hooked the moment their eyes met. The more she

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thought about Micah the more she wanted to cry. Ash looked at her and nudged her with his elbow.

“You thinkin’ about Micah?”

“Is it that obvious?”

“Well, the tears in your eyes gave it away.”

“Hm.” She wiped her eyes with the back of her paw. “I was wondering when the next time I see him would be. I mean, I can see him like he was standing right in front of me, but each time I do I get the terrible feeling that I’ll never see him again.”

“You shouldn’t think that way. I made you a promise. I would get you and those two back to our world and to your families. I mean to do just that, even if it means sacrificing my own life to do that.”

“What about Calleigh?”

“I can only hope that if it comes to that, she would understand and not hate me forever because I did what I had to at any cost to help the three of you. If it does come to that, please tell her that I will always love her no matter where I am.”

“Don’t talk like that. We’ll get home. All of us.”

“Sorry. I just haven’t had much reason for hope this week. What with all that’s happened to me and around me. I guess I do now, though.”

Cole stuck his head around the corner and saw Cassie and Ash. “Cass. The coast is clear. You can do whatever it was you were gonna do. Jake’s already gone to take a shower and I’m on my way there now. Who knows? Maybe, we can...”

“Don’t even say it, you dirty son of a bitch.”

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“Whoa! You better lay down, boy. Bless your heart.” Ash rose from the floor. Cole glared back at him and raise his right paw and curled up all of the fingers except the middle one.

“Fuck you.”

Ash laughed to himself as Cole turned and walked back down the hallway. Ash was once again alone with his thoughts. Ash tried not to think of Calleigh any longer and instead turned his thoughts to the problems right in front of them. There was the matter of the unknown number of gun toting furs that would be present at the gathering. Whether or not they could get into Jake’s house to procure what firearms they could carry would not guarantee their survival. Cole and Jake were the most vulnerable, not being able to use magic in any way. Cassie would at least survive longer with the aid of her bracelets, but Ash still feared for her. He, on the other paw, could not die. Un would heal any and all wounds he would undoubtedly receive. *What are we gonna do?* Ash put his head back and stared at the ceiling above him. He suddenly considered telling Cole and the two felines that he would not let them go. They would argue. He knew they would. Nothing came to him. No good reason for them to sit this fight out and wait for Ash to return. Even if he could get away without them, they would follow in the car they had arrived at the school in.

Ash looked down the hall and saw Jake trotting towards him. Jake smiled as he caught sight of the fox and sat down in front of Ash. Ash was silent for a moment. He tried to think of what he could say, but nothing came to him. Ash gave the leopard a half-hearted smirk, to which the cat merely raised his eyebrows. *I’ve got to say something.*

“Jake?”

“Yeah?”

“What sort of guns do you have back at your house?”

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“Big guns. Lots of big guns. And some small ones too. Why?”

“There’s still a chance of us getting hit no matter how many guns you bring along. You know that, right?”

“Of course, I know that. Why do you ask?”

Ash sighed and looked away for a second then looked back at the cat. “I don’t want you, or Cole, or Cassie for that matter, going along with me tonight.”

“I’m sorry? I could have sworn you just said you didn’t want us?”

“That’s right. There’s too great a risk to your lives and...”

“Stop right there, fox! There’s too great a risk to our lives? Well, what about your life? Huh? Tell me that, what happens to us if you get killed? And, don’t give me that Un-will-save-me crap either! You said it yourself! The Un from this world is dead. Hell, Kordak probably did it himself!”

Ash held up a paw for silence. “Jake, calm down. I would prefer that the three of you come with me, really, but I won’t be able to fight Kordak and worry about the three of you as well. If you have another suggestion, I would love to hear it, believe me. The thought of facing that demonic bastard all by myself scares me more than anything I’ve ever seen does. I’ve even been put on display for a bunch of freakish creatures called humans. I would just as soon be ogled at by a bunch of fleshy bipeds than go up against Kordak without my furiends there for help. So, please, figure something out so you three can come. I don’t know much about guns, but if my math is right there’s going to be a hell of a lot of bullets flying past our heads.”

“All right. Let me think a minute.”

Ash got up to stretch his legs while Jake thought. Ash decided to test some of his powers while he waited. He started by summoning orbs of blue energy in the palms of his paws and then

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clenching his fists to extinguish them. He did this several times before he was satisfied with the effect. Then, extending his right paw out in front of him, Ash generated a blue lightning bolt that was just over three and three quarters feet in length. The bolt of energy resolved into a sword with a three-foot blade of curving folded steel. The slightly foot long hilt was wrapped tightly with black cotton. The guard that separated the hilt and the blade was round and had the same trispiritum symbol on it that was on Ash's back. A yelp from Jake drew Ash's attention from the sword and he turned to see what had happened. Jake had jumped up from the floor and walked towards Ash but stopped abruptly when he saw the sword in his paw.

“Ooh, sorry. What did you come up with?”

“I just remembered that along with all the weapons back at my house there are some Kevlar vests the three of us could use. I'm doubting you'll actually need one, but, yeah, that's what I got. What d'you think?”

“Sounds great, as long as the vests'll stop the bullets.”

“They should.”

“Should?”

Jake merely winked and walked passed by Ash and headed around the corner. Ash rolled his eyes at the receding leopard then looked around the hall. He deemed the walls far enough apart and the ceiling high enough for him to swing the sword around a few times to get a feel for it. Ash raised the sword over his head with both paws and brought it straight down. The tip of the blade stopped mere centimeters from the floor. He brought the sword back and held it over his right shoulder, the blade angled to the left. He swung it through the air in a downward arc towards his left hindpaw. When he raised it again, the blade was over his left should angled to the right. The next swinging arc was directed towards his right hindpaw. He continued the

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swings, alternating sides, as he advance down the hallway. After the next down-and-to-the-right swing, Ash brought up the sword and reversed his grip and stabbed the sword behind him.

“Whoa! Watch it!”

Ash looked around and found Cassie standing behind him, the tip of the sword pointing straight at her midriff. There was a swirling barrier of purple energy pressing against the sharp blade. Cassie was very quick to react. *She’s a cat! Of course, she is.* The only thing that was probably faster than Cassie’s reflexes were the bullets they would face later. Ash lowered the sword and turned to face Cassie fully.

“I am so sorry. I didn’t hear you walk up.”

“Jake and Cole are ready to leave. They’ve already switched the license plates on the other car again.”

“Being a bit overly cautious, aren’t they?”

“Maybe, maybe not. What are we gonna do after we finish up getting things together?”

“We’ll meet somewhere and put everything in my car and then drive to Clawson. It’ll have to be some place where we can leave the other car. Any ideas?”

“What about that parking garage in town next to the Atlas, Inc. building? It’s big enough to hide a car in for a while.”

“Right.” The Atlas, Inc. building held a certain meaning for Ash he had never told anyfur about.

Ash and Cassie joined Cole and Jake outside the school. Cole and Cassie climbed in their car and headed off towards the Sommers’ residence. Jake climbed into the passenger’s seat of the coupe, while Ash settled in behind the wheel and started the car. After a few minutes of driving, Ash stopped the car down the block from Jake’s house and turned off the motor. There

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was a police cruiser sitting in front of the house and an officer was walking around the house looking in the windows. They waited while the cop finished his inspection then climbed back in the car and drove off. Ash started the car again and pulled up to the front of Jake's home. The two of them climbed from the car and ran to the door. Ash put on a pair of gloves he had found in the glove box and tried the doorknob. The door swung away and they bent low to avoid the yellow crime scene tape stretched across the frame.

Once inside, Jake rushed up stairs to his room. Ash stayed to close the door and to make sure they had not been seen. When he was satisfied, Ash went up stairs after Jake. He entered Jake's room and gasped at the sight of all the pistols and assault rifles in the closet and on the bed. Jake gave Ash two oversized duffels and instructed him to put anything he was presented with in them. Ash did as he was told and placed assault weapon after assault weapon into one of the duffels until it was full. The other duffel received pistols, holsters on leather harnesses and all the extra ammunition it could hold. When they were finished, the first duffel held four submachine guns with folding stocks, four Uzi machine pistols and three bundles of arrows. The second duffel contained at least twelve pistols ranging from full-sized and compact semi-automatics to six-shot revolvers. Ash raised his eyebrows at Jake when he stepped out of the closet carrying a quiver of more arrows and a wooden recurve bow with a black leather wrapped grip. Ash looked up at Jake.

Ash held up the two duffel bags. "All of this and you want to bring that?"

"It was my mother's. It's really the only thing I have to remember her. It's the same in our world."

"Oh, I didn't know."

"I never told you. Never told anyone."

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“Okay. Let’s go. Oh, the vests!”

Jake grabbed three vests, one from under his bed and two from the closet in his father’s bedroom. Ash and Jake then left the house and returned to the car. After stowing their new toys, they drove off to meet Cole and Cassie at the Atlas, Inc. parking garage. They sat in the car and waited. As they waited, Jake pulled one of the duffel bags from the back seat and began removing some of the machine guns. He pulled the other bag where he could reach it and began pulling ammo clips from it and loading the guns. When he was finished with the machine guns, he placed them back in the bag, safeties on all of them. Jake heaved the other bag into his lap and removed all of the revolvers, four in all. He gave them to Ash along with two unopened boxes of hollow-point bullets.

Ash opened one of the ammo boxes and hefted one of the revolvers with nickel-plating. After determining how to swing out the cylinder, Ash pushed a bullet into each of the six chambers of the ten guns. Jake crawled into the back seat and began setting up the leather harnesses for use. By the time the others arrived, forty-five minutes later, Jake had two sets of harnesses with all of the guns he could fit on them ready to wear. Ash looked back at him as Cole and Cassie ran towards the coupe. He noticed that Jake had put on a black sweater and that Cole and Cassie seemed to have done the same. Cassie climbed in the front seat and Cole in the back. Cole saw the two harnesses laden with guns and looked up at Jake. The leopard merely smiled back at him.

“What’s all this?”

“One harness for you, one for me. Each harness has two submachine guns, two Uzi pistols, four semi-auto pistols and two revolvers. All loaded with hollow-point rounds and ready to use. Just gotta turn off the safeties. What did you guys find?”

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“Nothing. All I found that we could use were these two swords. Not a one gun.”

“It’s all right. We’ll stop some where safe when we get there and the two of you can put those on.”

Ash pulled the car out into the street and set off towards the interstate as he spoke. Cassie fidgeted in her seat, obviously discomfited by the presence of so many firearms. Jake and Cole were talking in the seat behind them in hushed voices. Something Cole said made Jake suddenly raise his voice.

“I do not squirm too much!”

“Yes, you do. Trust me.”

“Well, if I do, it’s because you insist on going in all the way! That’s not the most comforting of experiences by a long shot.”

Cassie let her head drop into her paws. “Oh God.”

“I’m sorry, but sometimes I just get carried away a little and...”

The rest of Cole’s words were drowned out as Ash turned on the radio and turned the volume up loud enough until he could not hear the wolf anymore. He glanced over at Cassie, who mouthed her gratitude at him. While she might have said it out loud, Ash could not hear her and did not turn the radio down until the looks from the back seat became especially nasty. Ash shot them a warning look in the rearview mirror as he reached for the volume control. Cautiously, he turned it towards him and the decibel level began to decrease. They discussed nothing more of their private escapades and instead opted for devising a plan for getting the three of them into the building. Ash listened to what they said as he drove the car down the highway, negotiating his way through maniacal drivers in large eighteen-wheelers. They decided that the easiest way would be to create some sort of distraction. Ash confessed something at this point.

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“I called Cain back this morning before you three woke up. I told him to inform Kordak that one of his devoted followers suddenly wasn’t so devoted anymore. He’s gonna tell that demonic bastard that this disgruntled follower is going to challenge his powers at the gathering tonight and proclaim that he can destroy him. Naturally Kordak’s gonna be pissed, but it’ll just piss him off to no end if the traitor turns out to be me. Unless, of course, this is our Kordak we’re dealing with and he already knows that it’s me. You sure you still wanna do this?”

The resounding chorus of “Yes!” was enough to shut Ash up for the rest of the trip into Clawson and, hopefully, to their ticket back home.

* * *

ASH opened the door and stepped out of the coupe and walked in the front door of the building belonging to the demon Kordak. He caught sight of Jason Cain and Kellen standing in a far corner of the lobby and nodded towards them. They returned the nod then resumed their conversation. Ash walked to the elevator and got in with the other members heading up to the changing rooms. The furs standing around Ash were all talking amongst themselves as the elevator traveled slowly upward.

“Did you hear the news?”

“Somefur’s gonna challenge Lord Brydak’s powers.”

“Must be out of their fuckin’ mind to even think it!”

“Well, if he tries anything, the gunfurs will get him if Brydak doesn’t.”

Ash heard a lot of the same on the ride up and on the walk to the males’ locker room. He walked in and moved to his locker. When he opened it, he noticed that his robe still bore the

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gold trimmings. Kordak, or Brydak, had not found a fur to take his place as Bianca's mate. Ash changed slowly to give the crowd a chance to thin out. He needed the privacy so none would see that he did not remove his shoes. If somefur saw this, they would tell Kordak and he would be able to create the distraction the others needed. Ash secured the sash around his waist and checked to make sure the robe hung low enough to hide his shod hindpaws as long as necessary. Movement behind him alerted Ash to the fact that he was not alone. He turned to find Kellen and Jason Cain standing behind him, watching him. Kellen was ready to go up, but Cain had not closed his robe.

“Jason told me what you had him tell Brydak. Are you sure you want to do that? It's kinda suicidal.”

“Not only kinda, it is. But, I assure you, I'll be fine.”

“All right.” Cain reached in his robe and pulled out a semi-automatic pistol. “I've decided to help you out with the soldiers. Don't worry, I'm very good with one of these.”

“And, other things, I've noticed. What was with all the extra license plates in the trunk?”

“Well, you can't be too cautious, can you?”

“Guess not. What are you gonna do about Bianca? I don't want her getting hurt.”

Kellen scratched his forehead, slightly embarrassed. “Well, I was planning on just grabbing her and getting out of there.”

“That's great. Some time's the best plans are the simplest plans. Well, we better get up there before we miss the fun.”

Ash left the locker room with Kellen and Cain walking behind him. They walked back around to the elevator and found Bianca waiting by the door. She seemed surprised by the fact that Kellen was walking so close to Ash and not giving him dirty looks. In fact, Kellen and Ash

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acted very amiably towards each other. Bianca smiled at the both of them as they all boarded the elevator. Jason stood at the front beside Kellen with Ash and Bianca standing towards the back of the cart. Bianca mentioned the news of the traitor revealing himself at the gathering. Ash merely nodded and agreed with her when she stated that the fur was completely insane. *I really think I am half the time.* The elevator stopped at the gathering chamber floor and the passengers stepped out into the crowded room. Ash looked around the moment he enter and began counting the number black-trimmed hoods.

Twenty. Twenty-five, maybe more. There was that many submachine guns and twice the number of pistols present in the room at that moment. Ash figured that they were all wearing bulletproof vests like the ones Jake had taken from his room. That might make subduing them a little difficult, but he had faith in his furiends. Ash walked with Bianca to where they had always stood while awaiting Kordak's entrance. However, they found Kordak already standing in the center of the room. He was flanked by five furs, each wearing a long black robe with the hood pulled low over his, or her, face. Each black robe sported a different colored trimmings along all of the hems. One was gold; another lavender; a third green; the fourth was scarlet and the final was an eerily familiar shade of blue. Ash felt that his chances may have just gone from bad to nonexistent. The design of the robes obviously showed that the wearers were warriors endowed with powerful magic. Their magic was probably given to them by Kordak, which was very bad. Kordak's magic was strong enough to destroy this world's Un; it would make short work of Ash if he let it. *But, I won't!*

“One among you has lost your way! And, he dares challenge my powers and charity! I will show little mercy towards this fool! This unbeliever!” Kordak stopped and looked around at the faces looking back at him. “Perhaps I am being too charitable. Perhaps I should act more

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hostile towards my followers, if they perceive me as weak! Well? Is that what you want? A more vile lord that befits his demonic status?" He paused and folded his arms. "I didn't think so. Now, I will ask this once and once alone. Will the unbeliever reveal himself and step forward?"

Kordak paused again and watched the crowd. A few fidgeted, but none stepped forward. Few would even look into his eyes, but still none moved. Then, as his head was turned to the left, he caught movement out of the corner of his red glowing right eye. He jerked his head around and saw Ash stepping forward, his head held high, his steps never faltering. Kordak unfolded his arms and looked taken aback by this development. *He had not thought it could be me!?* His confusion over this unexpected turn did not show on Ash's expressionless face. Gasps around the room were the only sounds besides the now distinct thudding noise of Ash's thick-soled shoes. Kordak turned more completely and glared down at the impudent fox now striding towards him. Ash stopped about twelve feet from the demon fox-bear hybrid, with a hint of feline. Ash looked into the demon's glowing eyes and gave the irate demon a wry grin.

"You!?" The word came out more as a hiss than anything else. "After all that I have done for you, you dare betray me?"

"After all you've done for me? What about what you've had me do for you? I had to dig up my dead brother. I had to kill a wolf I've never met in another town. I was forced to turn a blind eye when you used my resurrected brother to murder Julie Christensen! And, what the fuck did I get in return? Cops breathing down my neck for a murder committed by a dead fur. Yeah, thanks a whole bunch."

More gasps and sharp intakes of breath filled the room as Ash spoke. Kordak did not respond, but his glare intensified.

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“Oh, and I forgot to mention the fact that you gave me that disease. God knows how many other furs you infected and why.”

“That was an experiment. Once you joined this cult I stopped the disease’s progression and saved your life. You were never to find out!”

“Well, I figured it out when I spoke to one of your other victims.” It was almost time to strike. He would need to destroy a section of the outer wall so Cassie and the others could swing in from the roof. “We had three things in common. We had fathers who had died violently. We had been infected with that disease. And, we had both been in your presence when we felt what we thought was a bee sting. Why the hell did it come back? Tell me that, you bastard! Son of a bitch! You fuckin’ son of a bitch!”

At this last word, Ash tore off the robe and launched himself at Kordak. The demon raised his right paw to fire an energy blast at Ash, who pivoted at the last second and dodged the blast. The glowing ball of orange fire soared low over the ducking heads of the gathered. It impacted on the wall with a loud bang. Debris flew everywhere, but the majority fell twenty-four stories to the street below. Kordak seemed surprised that Ash could move that fast, but he was even more surprised when a leopard and wolf wearing Kevlar vests and carrying numerous weapons, including a wooden recurve bow, a quiver of arrows, and two katana. The leopard with the bow and arrows, the wolf with the swords. As soon as they hit the floor, they released the ropes and pulled two submachine guns from where they dangled at their waists and rose. They proceeded through the startled furs back-to-back and turning in place with each step, giving the illusion that they were both orbiting a central point.

The room was suddenly filled with the sounds of numerous guns being ready to fire. Ash looked around and the twenty-plus soldiers drawing their own machine guns from inside their

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robes. They did not fire. They were at a slight disadvantage as there was a chance that any stray bullet could take out one of their own or some of the innocent furs scrambling for the elevators. Jake and Cole stood a little ways from Ash, back-to-back and ready to fire. Ash motioned for them to wait until they were left alone with the soldiers and Kordak. They would not, however, get the chance. At that moment, the black robed figure with the gold lining leap from behind Kordak and attacked Ash. An elongated claw slashed into his inner right thigh, then into his right arm and then sliced through his throat, severing both the carotid and the jugular. Ash fell to the ground. There was a scream behind him. Bianca was still in the room and had seen Ash being attacked. Kordak began to laugh.

“You’re a fool, brother, to think you could challenge Lord Brydak’s powers and live to tell about it.” The fur lowered his hood to reveal the face of Micah Reynolds. “What did you think would happen?”

“Precisely this.”

The shock on Micah’s face was only surpassed by that of Kordak. Ash rose to his hindpaws and tilted his head back to stretch his neck. As he did this, the gaping wound began to glow bright blue and vanished, leaving behind only the blood that had drenched the front of the green sweater. The wounds in his arm and legs did the same. Ash looked himself over then raised his eyes to stare into Micah’s face. He balled up his paw and planted a strong punch into Micah’s chest. The undead fox lifted from the ground and into the air, hitting the ground with a loud thud. Twenty or more successive clicks warned Ash to duck as the soldiers opened fire. They did not fire at Cole and Jake, but at Ash. The soldiers seemed to have forgotten about the two armed furs that had swung in uninvited. Ash pivoted on his heel and created a barrier of

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blue energy between him and the hail of bullets. More gunshots from somewhere else were heard. Two soldiers dropped.

Jake and Cole turned and opened fire at the soldiers. Few bullets actually hit any of the furs, but their goal was more to frighten and confuse than to kill. Having no extra ammunition, once the submachine guns were empty they dropped them to the ground and grabbed two pistols from their holsters. They began firing again. This time some of the soldiers took notice of the two and turned their guns on them. Cole and Jake had managed not to hit a single fur with the first barrage, but now became convinced that their initial approach was not working. They turned it up one notch and began trying to wound as many as possible. The soldiers must have noticed because they began dropping and rolling as they fired. A bullet got past Ash's barrier as tore through the muscles and bones of his left shoulder. The initial impact caused Ash to falter, but he recovered before he could sustain any more damage. He went on the offensive.

Ash dropped the barrier and jumped at the nearest soldier. Jake and Cole continued to cycle through their small armories until they were completely out of bullets. The twenty-plus soldiers were down to a more manageable eight. Two of the remaining soldiers moved to cover the hole in the wall, thinking to bar any escape. The two of them, however, were knocked to the floor as another dark shape swung in through the opening and planted a hindpaw firmly in both of their backs. The dark shape hit the floor and rolled to a standing position. Cassie pushed the hair from her face and looked around the other room. Ash was at that moment seizing the collar of another soldier and spinning him into yet another. Both fell and hit their heads on the floor, plunging both into unconsciousness. Jake and Cole must have been out of bullets as they were dodging bullets as they ran towards the four remaining soldiers.

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In what seemed like no time, all the soldiers were down and the only warriors Kordak had were Micah and the other four black-robed figures. Ash could guess who only one of them was, the other three would prove to be a shock. The other four stepped forward to join Micah where he stood and lowered their hoods. Jesse was there, as Ash had suspected. The other three were Lilia, his mother; Victor, Jake's father; and Calleigh, Cole's sister. They each shared a very evil look in their eyes as they glared at Ash and his friends. They let their robes fall to the floor, shedding the added weight of the heavy fabric. The five warriors launched themselves at Ash and the others. Ash ran forward, determined to get to Kordak. He jumped and, planting a hindpaw in Victor's back, launched himself at the demon. The trispiritum katana appeared in his paw. Ash brought it down and it clanged against the double-edged longsword of Kordak. With each clang there was also a shower of purple sparks.

Cassie, Cole and Jake had their paws full fighting the demonically empowered warriors with the faces of their friends and family. Cole had drawn the two katana from their sheathes and used them to slice into the flesh of Micah and Jesse, refusing to approach Calleigh. Each slash healed over the moment it was inflicted. Jake had backed away a safe distance and was launching arrows through the air and into Victor and Lilia as they advanced on him. Cassie, being left with Calleigh, had generated two small shields on her arms and used them to deflect Calleigh's blows while delivering a few of her own. Calleigh, being the faster of the two, got around Cassie's defenses and succeeded in gouging out a chunk of her right arm. Cassie screamed in pain and backed away. The scream made Ash turn his attention from Kordak. The panther girl needed his help. He started off towards her, but was stopped as Kordak seized him from behind and stabbed the sword through his spine. The blade exploded from the center of Ash's chest, caked in his own blood.

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Kordak pulled the sword out and let Ash drop to the floor. Ash pulled himself to his paws and knees. He reached for his sword and noticed for the first time that there was something on the blade. Words carved in the folded steel in a flowing, slanted script. Ash pulled the blade closer and examined the writing engraved there on. It read:

Cassie Archer Cole Sommers Jake O'Connell

Three true Furiends of a true Furiend

Ash gripped the sword in both paws and concentrated on healing himself. The triangular guard began to glow. The glow traveled up the curved blade of the sword and then receded back into Ash and filtered into the symbol on his back. Ash pictured his wings and his tails. His own tail glowed then separated into nine tail lashing about on the floor. Ash felt the wings exploded from his back in a way they never had before. He glanced over his shoulder and saw why. He rose and turned to face Kordak, who was just as surprised as he was. Ash was standing before then, completely healed and with six orange-feathered wings stretching from his shoulders.

His blue eye flared with blue energy as he raised the sword in his paws. The tip of the blade was pointing directly at Kordak's hearts. Kordak took a step back. He was afraid of the fox standing before him. Ash held the sword tightly, waiting for the attack that was sure to come at any moment. The blade continued to pulse with blue energy that emanated from the brightly glowing trispiritum guard at the top of the hilt. The six wings on his back had started to fold in, but were poised to lash out as weapons or open to take flight. As he waited, Ash began to feel the large trispiritum symbol on his back burning with a reassuring warmth. The sounds of the scuffles taking place around him intruded on his thoughts. He wanted to help his furiends, but did not get the chance. Kordak launched himself at Ash and seized his throat, lifting him from the ground and soaring toward the hole in the wall.

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“Care to step out side?”

The snarling voice was the last thing he heard before the sounds of wind began rushing past his ears. The cold wind buffeted the fur on his face as he broke free of Kordak’s grip. The demon flew away and hovered in the air, waiting for Ash. Ash righted himself and soared upwards to meet the demon that had been the bane of his existence for far too long. Battle was joined in the skies high above Clawson.

* * *

THE sounds of the battle outside in the night sky drifted to the ears of friends of Ash Reynolds still battling in the gathering chamber. Five on three, they fought. Cassie dove and twisted away from the swiped of Calleigh’s elongated claws. Jake, having used all of his arrows, withdrew two of the athames from he had hidden them. Brandishing the blades, Jake lunged at Victor and Lilia and began slashing at any point on their bodies that presented itself. Jake had his paws full of the two of them. Every wound healed, and healed faster than with Ash. Even Victor’s tail, once Jake had severed it, had grown back at an alarming rate. Jake spun around a swiping arm and kicked his father in his spine. He jerked his head down and out of the way of a swinging hindpaw. He rose too soon and the hindpaw came back and the heel caught him in the side of his head. He spun from the force of the blow and glared back at this malevolent reincarnation of Ash’s mother.

Cole was having equal trouble with Micah and Jesse. Cole twirled his katana around in a flurry and began slashing at the two foxes with the blades. There seemed to be no way to kill the furs attacking them. Cole spun around and brought the dragon head pommel of the katana in his

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right paw crashing down on Micah's head. The blood that oozed from the wound was not red, but black. Only enough blood to cover the wound flowed out and then receded into the gash. The wound healed and Micah smiled. He raised his right paw, palm up. From the center of his paw the tip of a curved black-bladed sword cut through the padding. Micah thrust his arm out to his side; the entirety of the sword exploding from his paw. The fox gripped the smooth black handle in his paw and smiled again at Cole.

The wolf took a step back as Jesse pulled the same trick as Micah. The black grip clasped in paw, Jesse raised his sword. The black was a deep red, the color of blood. Cole looked down at his own swords and wondered if they would hold up to the enemy blades. Micah and Jesse began to advance on the worried wolf. Cole backed away from the pair to give himself time to think. He was quickly running out of room to walk. The wolf suddenly felt his thrashing tail brush against the hard stone wall of the chamber. He looked behind him and saw the black stone and knew that the only way out now was forward. Cole turned his eyes back to the two foxes and looked from their faces then to the swords in their paws. Cole crossed his two blades in front of his face and took a deep breath.

“Let's see if I remember how to do this.”

Cole planted a hindpaw firmly on the wall and kicked off, launching himself at his momentarily startled foes. The hindpaw he had kicked with lashed out and caught the older fox under his snout. Jesse was lifted from the floor and sent sprawling through the air. Cole carried the move into a smooth back flip. He hit the floor and rolled forward thereby dodging a decapitating blow from Micah's swinging blade. From the floor, Cole turned and planted the dragon-head hilt in Micah's stomach and then with the other, which had a lion-head pommel, clubbed the fox in the back of the head as he rose from his squat position. Jesse was back up and

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rushing at Cole. *The moment of truth.* He swung both swords as one. The two metallic clangs told Cole that he had nothing to fear from shattering blades. Cole pivoted to strike again and just missed being sliced in half by a black blade.

Cassie ducked around behind Calleigh to avoid a similar mishap. Cassie dropped to the floor and rolled away coming up and facing Calleigh. The latter stretched out her arms and two long knives emerged from the padding of her paws. The former, in a much less gruesome manner, fashioned for herself a similar pair of knives of glowing, purple energy. The two females launched at each other and began attacking violently with the knives. The both of them were angry at beings they could not defeat. Cassie was angry at the demon Kordak for separating her from her beloved Micah and then turning this world's Micah into a monster to fight for him. Calleigh's anger was directed towards her own brother whom she could not defeat because Cassie would not let up. Slash. Stab. Pivot. Slash. Stab. Pivot. The pattern repeated and repeated, only varying in the speed with which the moves were executed.

Calleigh was the first to break the pattern when she struck upwards with her knee and caught Cassie under her chin. The catgirl stumbled back and stopped, wiping the blood from the corners of her mouth with the back of her paw. Cassie glared back at the grinning Calleigh. She twirled the knives around her index finger and attacked. Cassie ducked under Calleigh's outstretched arm and stab one of her knives beneath the wolfgirl's left breast and into her heart. Calleigh gasped and began to stagger. Cassie stood and plunged her other knife into the top of Calleigh's head. She released both knives and stepped back. Cassie lifted her right hindpaw from the floor and kicked the punctured Calleigh square in the chest. Calleigh stumbled back and fell to the floor with a thud. Cassie straightened up and pushed the hair from her eyes.

"Bitch."

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Cassie turned away and saw that Jake was having some trouble with Victor and Lilia. She created two more knives out of thin air and started towards him. A long groan from behind her made Cassie stop in her tracks. She turned and watched as Calleigh stood up from the floor, the wounds in her chest and head gone. Calleigh gave her an evil smile then began moving towards her. Eight loud bangs erupted from behind Calleigh. Her body jerked unnaturally as eight bullets ripped into her back, two exiting her chest and barely missing Cassie. Calleigh fell to her knees from the impacts and slumped to the floor. The badger that Ash had spoken of was standing there with a gun, the barrel smoking. Jason Cain walked towards her and stepped over Calleigh's fallen body. He touched Cassie on the shoulder.

“Are you alright?”

Cassie did not get a chance to answer. There was a sickening cracking sound as Calleigh grabbed Cain's head from behind and twisted it, breaking his neck and killing him. Cassie gave a yelp then dove away from Calleigh's next onslaught. The wolfgirl was relentless. She would not stop attacking and she would not die. No. She could not die. *Shit!* Another pair of knives fell through the pads of her paws. Cassie raised her own to counter the attack and they were at it again. Cassie was ducking and pivoting. Calleigh was stabbing and slicing. Cassie was doing her best but Calleigh's knives were flying at lightning speeds. One of the blades flashed past her face and sliced down into her left bicep. Cassie pulled back and looked down at her arm. The blood ran from the wound and stained the sleeve of the black sweater. Cassie glared back at the wolf and attacked her with renewed fury.

Jake heard Cassie's initial cry of pain, but could not break from his own battle to help his friend. Lilia ran at Jake and somersaulted over his head, twisting in the air, she landed facing Jake's back. Before Jake could react, Lilia clubbed him in the back of his head. He fell forward

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and his father's knee swung up and caught him in the gut. The wind knocked out of him and his head throbbing, Jake dropped to his knees. Victor and Lilia paced around Jake like two animals waiting to see if their prey would put up a fight. *If it's a fight they want, it's a fight they'll get.* Jake took a deep breath and reached for the two knives where they had fallen. He stood up and faced his two monstrous enemies. Jake gritted his teeth and lurched at Victor and Lilia. He kicked Lilia in the stomach then slashed on athame across Victor's chest leaving a deep gash. Wound vanishing, Victor grabbed Jake's wrist and pulled on his arm. Jake screamed as his father jerked his arm out of its socket.

Jake backed away, his arm hanging limp at his side. He tried biting back the tears, but the pain was too great and a few slipped by. Jake fell to his knees. The leopard held his arm still by clamping his knees around his wrist. He placed one of the knife in his mouth to bite down on then he pushed his shoulder back into alignment with a nauseating pop. Jake got back to his hindpaws. Though his shoulder ached, he had to fight. He had to survive. If he lasted long enough for Ash to defeat Kordak and get back, they might have a chance. *Might.* They were unstoppable. Unstoppable! But, Jake, Cole and Cassie were not. They could be wounded and had been wounded. Their fur, shirts and pants were all stained with their blood. They were getting tired. They were hungry and they needed to rest. But, they could not rest.

Jake's ears twitched. He suddenly had a very bad feeling about how this was all going to turn out. Lilia stooped and picked up the knife that had fallen from Jake's limp paw. She began walking towards Jake, who started backing away from her. The vixen turned the knife over and over in her paws as she advanced on Jake. Jake pulled the third knife from its hidden recess. Gripping the knives, Jake lunged at Lilia again. The three knives clanged together numerous times. Jake only relented and backed off when Lilia sliced off his left ear. He could feel the

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blood running down the side of his head, but he did not take his eyes off of Lilia. The vixen set upon him once more. The blade of her knife sliced into Jake's left arm and made him drop the knife clutched in his paw. She spun around and came back to embed the blade of her knife deep in Jake's stomach. Before falling to the floor, Jake returned the favor. Knives in their stomachs, they both fell to ground and began bleeding profusely.

* * *

ASH flew out over the city after Kordak. Each time their blades met there was a shower of purple sparks that fell towards the streets below them. Kordak was afraid. *I can see it in his eyes!* Ash was more confused than scared. He had been sure that this Kordak/Bryan combination was the same pair from his own world and they had been behind everything. Now, it seemed that Ash had been wrong. It was, however, possible that Kordak had instigated Ash's current private Hell, but the fact that this Kordak had not known suggested that something was not right. Perhaps, the Kordak from Ash's world was still in Ash's world terrorizing his friends and family at that very moment. At the thought of this, Ash's anger began to boil over and he put on a burst of speed. Kordak began to grow larger as Ash came upon him.

Kordak sensed Ash drawing nearer and swung around to face him. Their swords met again and again. Ash's blue glowing blade meeting Kordak's blazing red sword. They slashed and sliced each other, rending limbs from torsos only to watch them reappear in moments. Kordak's eyes burned with a never ending malice that seemed always directed towards Ash and his family. Ash wanted so bad to tear those eyes from the demon's head just for the hell of it. He could not get close enough to try and they would grow back within seconds. Occasionally,

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Kordak would turn and lash his eight tails out at Ash. *Definitely feline!* But, where could they have come from? What could Kordak have done to get eight feline tails? A fiery red blade flashing by inches over his head cut Ash's thoughts short.

Ash started dropping towards the ground. He began pulling slow revolving corkscrews so he could keep an eye on the ground and on his approaching enemy. He closed his wings and they vanished into his back. He soared between cars that had stopped to watch the strange fireworks that had erupted in the night sky. Frightened stares and startled yells were all Ash saw and heard as he flew mere inches from the snowy road. Ash looked in front of him and saw a car sitting directly in his path. He started to rise, but Kordak hit him from behind like a battering ram. The impact threw Ash into the hood of the car. The driver gave a scream then jumped from the car and ran. Ash pulled himself up as quickly as possible. He turned, scarred face healing as he did, and found Kordak standing in the middle of the road turning his sword over in his paw. Ash held his own sword in front of him with both paws and began pacing in a circle around the demon. He raised his sword and attacked.

Furs stopped on the street to watch the shocking spectacle unfolding before them. The two blades effused more brightly glowing energy as they swung through the air and clashed. The audience would gasp when one of the combatants was wounded. They would gasp again when the wounds healed on their own and the warriors fought on without flinching. The fight continued down the now still street through freezing winds. The cold did not affect Ash or Kordak. The energy pouring from their bodies generated the heat to keep them warm. Kordak spun and lashed out with his left paw, palm open. Another longsword appeared in his paw as he struck. Ash ducked under the blade then leapt over the second as it swung for his legs. The first

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blade came back and took off his right ear. Ash fell back and rolled to his hindpaws. There was a trail of blood from where his ear had passed over the white snow.

Before Ash was fully standing, Kordak was there. His large knee planted itself firmly in Ash's stomach, knocking the wind out of him. The force threw Ash back down the street. His sword flew from his paw and spiraled through the air. Hitting the road hard, Ash rolled to a stop. A cracking sound drifted to his ears and the pain told him that his leg had snapped in two by the impact with the pavement. Others heard the crack as well as the wind had died. Ash pulled himself up and gave his leg a jerk. The bones snapped back into place and healed. His ear had also grown back by now. Ash cast around, searching for his sword. *Where is it?* Kordak was approaching fast, both swords held high and ready to strike. Ash concentrated on his sword. The blade appeared in his paw in a bolt of blue energy. He brought it up and blocked both of Kordak's downward strikes. The flash of purple from the contact threw shadows across Kordak's bear/fox hybrid face and gave it a more menacing look.

The showers of purple sparks resumed as the battle continued. They fought on as the crowd became larger. Sirens intruded on Ash's concentration. Someone had called the police about the disturbance. Ash dodged a swing sword and glanced behind him. Four police cruisers drove up and blocked the street. Another four cars appeared to cordon off the road behind Ash and Kordak. The officers jumped from their cars and pointed their weapons at the dueling furs. They did not fire. Ash turned his attention back to Kordak. The demon did not pay the cops any attention either and attacked Ash again. Ash blocked the first few swings of Kordak's twin swords then flipped over his head and stabbed him from behind. A bolt of white energy escaped from the wound as Ash removed his blade. Kordak dropped to his knees and began trembling.

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Ash looked down at the demon and furrowed his brow. There was a bang and a bullet ripped into Ash's chest, but he did not flinch.

Kordak suddenly rose and flew into the air, still trembling. Ash kicked off from the ground, his six wings reappearing as he soared into the night sky. He trailed behind Kordak and waited to see if the demon was trying to trick Ash. His enemy kept weaving as he flew like he was losing control. Ash watched him carefully. Kordak would veer to the left and then back to the right before pulling himself back on course. *What is he doing?* Ash could not discern an answer to his question. It seemed that something was racking Kordak's body with an unbearable pain that was causing him to lose control. But, what could be doing this to him? *Must've done something when I stabbed him.* The thought struck Ash and he began trying to determine what he might have done. All of a sudden, Kordak began to dive straight down. He was going to plow into the top of one of the buildings directly below. Ash took off after him.

Ash watched the demon as he flew down after him. Something was happening to the falling demon fox/bear hybrid. He was splitting into two separate beings. The split was finished and two different creatures were now plummeting to the buildings below. The larger of the two still bore the wings of Kordak and, giving them a good flap, righted himself and flew off. The other, smaller one continued to fall straight down. Ash glanced from the escaping demon to the falling fur. Demon. Fur. Demon. Fur. *Fuck!* Ash flapped his six wings hard and shot downward. He passed the falling fur and turned to look up at him. The fur turned over and over in the air until he hit Ash. Ash absorbed the collision and held onto the fur so he did not fall. Floating to a building below, Ash laid the fur gently on the ground. He looked at the fur's face and generated a ball of energy to illuminate the face.

“Todd!”

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Todd Hunter, physics teacher and sorcerer, lay on the rooftop in front of Ash. It suddenly became clear why Kordak's tails had appeared the way they had. Now all that Ash had to do was find out how Todd fit into the events of the past week and get Kordak. First thing's first, Ash reached down and touched Todd's shoulder. The lion jolted up right and looked around, confused. The feline looked himself over to make sure he was in one piece. He jumped up and began walking around. His legs ached and needed to be stretched. Ash watched Todd as he walked around the roof, getting his bearings and working his muscles. The lion started to laugh. It was the kind of laugh that showed overwhelming happiness without being too loud. Todd spun around and caught sight of Ash, a large grin on his muzzle. The smile vanished and was replaced by something else. Shame.

“Oh my God, Ash! I am so sorry. I'm sorry about everything!”

“What are you talking about?”

“I had too. There was nothing else I could do. You have to believe me!”

“I don't even understand what you're saying. Everything you've ever done has been to help me. Why should you be sorry?”

“Nothing I've done has been to help you. It's all been to aid him!”

“Kordak?”

“Yes.”

Ash became confused. “But, what about when you helped me get home from the human world? That helped me.”

“It wasn't supposed to.” Todd fell silent for a moment. His head dropped into his paws; his shoulders began heaving lightly. When he looked back to Ash, there were tears in his eyes.

“I summoned Eteil'me and sent him to get rid of you. I deliberately altered the transportation

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array to damage your body so you wouldn't be able to fight him when you got back. I brought you and your furiends here and left your families vulnerable."

Ash looked at the lion in mixed disbelief and hatred. What was Hunter saying? Had he never been a furiend of Ash's at all? Ash stood up and walked backwards from the feline mage. Ash's retreat was hindered by the door of a roof exit. The sword dangled at his side in his relaxed paw. He turned his face away from the lion, not wanting to look at him. His head was swimming. So much was going on. So much that did not make any sense. Questions had to be answered.

"Tell me everything you did for Kordak. When did you start working for him?"

"Two years ago. Bryan Mayer came to me after you defeated him and went to destroy Clothor. He had found out what I could do and wanted me to alter the timeline so that he had been bonded with Kordak. I did. Then, after two year of summoning low-level demons to send after you, I decided to do something about it."

"What did you do?"

"I reset events again. You had died in Clothor's realm and then again when you were attacked by one of those other demons. I brought you back and performed the ritual to fuse you with Un. I knew what might happen to me, or... but I had to do what I did. Kordak then forced me to summon Eteil'me and instruct him to send you to another dimension." Todd stopped to take a breath and collect his thoughts. "He hoped the transfer would kill you, but fortunately that didn't happen. When he found out, he told me to retrieve you but to make sure you arrived badly injured."

"You fuckin' bastard! I trusted you!"

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“Wait. Please, hear me out.” Todd pulled himself up. “He wasn’t surprised when you showed up and defeated Eteil’me, or at least not as surprised as I thought he would be. It had seemed that he had almost counted on it. He told me that he had another plan to defeat you and destroy your family. I didn’t want to help him anymore, but he threatened me. I had no choice. I brought you here and then came along with him. I also brought those three friends of yours here so they might be able to help you.”

“Well, they’re doing a great job, no thanks to you!”

“I am truly sorry. Can’t you believe me?”

“I don’t know. Why was Kordak so surprised when I showed up like I did? And why hadn’t he known the disease had come back?”

“He made a mistake in absorbing me. He should have just killed me. When I was inside him, I could tamper with his mind. I blocked out his own memories and personality and brought forth the ones of this world. It gave you the upper paw, but had I known about the disease I could have stopped it.”

“Why was my mother and stepfather killed, if Kordak believed he was from this world? He’d have no reason to do that.”

“I was unable to complete the... reprogramming in time to stop him from resurrecting your father and brother and using them to kill. The blood of Julie Christensen, Lilia Reynolds and Cameron Scott is on my paws. I do not, however, know why your mother was brought back like she was. Nor do I know why Ms. Sommers and Mr. O’Connell were, either. I was unaware that they had even been killed.”

Todd stopped there. Ash could feel that there was something else. Something the lion had decided not to share of his own volition.

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I can fix that. “Why would you help that monster? What did he ever do for you?”

“He did nothing for me. The son of a bitch kidnapped my daughter! She was the only family I had and he took her from me! What would you have done had it been your daughter?”

“I would have gone after her! I wouldn’t have left her to that maniac! And, I certainly wouldn’t have worked for him.”

“Not everyfur can be a hero like you, Ash.”

Ash’s anger began to abate. Todd Hunter had not turned against him willingly. He had done so out of fear for his only child’s life. A child that Ash had not known about until now. Ash began wondering about what would happen to the girl now that Kordak undoubtedly knew that Todd had betrayed him.

“What happens to your daughter now that you’ve turned on Kordak?”

“I don’t know. I began thinking a while ago that Kordak either no longer had her, or had already killed her. I felt I had nothing to lose. All I had left was my seemingly unending servitude to that monster.”

“But, if she’s still alive he’ll kill her now that he knows you betrayed him.”

“I have always been able to sense her. But, before I brought you here I realized that I could not feel her anywhere. I have nothing. I have nothing except one last request of you.”

“What?”

“I want you to kill me.”

“What!? No! Are you out of your fucking mind? I won’t ki...”

Ash’s voice trailed off as he suddenly felt very lightheaded. The sword fell from his grip and clanged to the rooftop. His six wings began to melt away until there were only two and those hung limp from his shoulder blades. The guard on his sword began to glow and Todd saw

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it for the first time. *A trispiritum?* The symbol flared and then, one by one, the three points vanished leaving an ordinary circular guard. The fur on Ash's back began to feel strange, like it was on fire. He dropped to his knees and fell forward on his paws. A white light shone through his sweater where it had been slashed by Kordak. Todd rushed to Ash and tore off the tattered garment. The trispiritum that had been burned into Ash's fur was disappearing just like the guard on the sword.

"Ash? How were you bonded with Un? Tell me. Tell me everything."

"There was a book with the ritual in it. It was simple, or would have been had this world's Un not been killed. They figured out a way to summon the Un from our world."

"Did they mix their blood with yours to do this?"

"Yeah. How did you know?"

"Ash. This is bad. I didn't bring you here body and soul. I only brought your souls. You're weak because your friends' souls have left his world."

"What are you saying?"

"Trispiritum. It means three spirits. Three souls. The symbol's gone. Those souls are gone. Ash, your friends are dead."

Ash did not want to believe what the lion said, but he could not push the feeling that it was true from his mind. He needed to go check on them, needed to protect them, to save them. He needed to... lie down. His head was swimming. He could barely stand up, let alone fly back to Kordak's tower. Ash tried standing again. *Can't do it.* He fell back against the wall and slid to the roof. He closed his eyes and began breathing slowly. Gripping his sword tightly, Ash stood up and tried to steady himself. Todd stood by in case Ash lost his balance again. He did.

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This time Ash fell forward. Todd stepped in front of him to catch the falling fox. There was the sound of sharp steel passing through warm flesh. Hunter gasped for air.

Todd stepped back from Ash until he had pulled himself off of the folded steel blade of Ash's sword. His clothes became drenched with his own blood as he backed away and fell to the ground. Ash took a step back and dropped his sword, the silver blade mostly red from Todd's blood. Ash stumbled backwards and fell once again to the rooftop. His eyes widened in horror at the growing red stain on Todd's close and the snow around him. The scene was horrifying. It was even worse than the murder of his mother and stepfather, and that was for only one reason. *I did this*. The thought washed over him like a sea of blood. *This was my fault*. Ash moved closer to the hemorrhaging lion. Todd turned his head and looked into Ash's eyes.

“Did I ever tell you about my daughter?” His voice was quiet and scratchy.

“No.” Ash was on the verge of tears. This lion lay here dying because of him. “No, you never told me about her.”

“She was beautiful. She'd be about eight years old.” Todd coughed and blood ran from the corners of his mouth. “She had her mother's eyes. My little....”

Todd fell silent, his head drooping to his chest. Ash watched and waited; hoping beyond all hope that the worst had not come. Ash's eyes flitted down to the feline's chest. It had ceased to heaving up and down with the rhythmic intakes of air, or even the haggard breathing of a dying fur. Todd Hunter, physics teacher and sorcerer, lay dead upon the roof of a six-story building in downtown Clawson. Ash started to look away but something clutched in Todd's paw caught his eye. Ash took the object from the lifeless paw. It was a gold locket in the shape of a heart. There were flecks of dried blood that stained the otherwise untarnished golden heart. Ash

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sat back and looked at the locket, tears still selling up in his blue eyes. There were letters engraved on the outside of the locket:

J&C

Ash opened the locket with great care and was presented with two, small color photos. The one on the inside of the cover was of a stunning lioness with beautiful golden hair falling around her shoulders. Her piercing blue eyes stared straight up at Ash. Her enchanting smile almost compelled the fox to smile despite his sorrow. Ash wondered what had happened to her and why Todd had never spoken of her. He turned his attention to the opposite picture. This picture was also of a lioness, but this one was far younger than the first picture. Her hair was brown and barely touched her shoulders. She had the same piercing blue eyes as the lioness in the first picture. Her smile was broad and silly, the smile of a child of about six- or seven-years-old. The smile of this little child, now fatherless, made Ash breakdown. He began sobbing uncontrollably as he thought of this poor girl sitting somewhere alone, not knowing that her father had been murdered, or what would happen to her.

“I’m sorry.”

* * *

WHEN he found that he had no more tears to shed, Ash was forced to decide what to do with the body of the fallen lion. What could he do? Ash had never had to dispose of a body before. What did somefur in this position do? Most would just toss the body into a dark alleyway and forget everything. This seemed almost sacrilegious to the bereaved fox. Despite the fact that he had helped Kordak and Bryan numerous times to ruin his life, Todd had proven to be a true

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friend in risking his life and the life of his daughter to set right all that had gone wrong. A noble fur deserves a noble funeral. But, what could he do? Ash stuffed the locket in his pocket as he rose from the rooftop. He looked down at the large pool of blood around the body. Before Ash knew what was happening, his paws were stretched out, palms facing down towards Todd. A voice in his head told him not to worry, told him that everything would be all right.

His paws became enveloped in roiling blue fire. The flames suddenly leapt from Ash's paws to the body before him. The eternally sleeping lion was engulfed by the blue-burning flames. The supernatural flames burned away Todd Hunter's body within a few minutes. The blood and ashes vanished from sight after the fire had consumed the body. Ash was left on the roof, alone with his guilt over Todd's death. He pulled the locket from his pant's pocket and looked at the two photos again. The smiling faces brought more tears to Ash's eyes, but he bit them back. He had to return to the tower to find out what had happened to Cassie and the other two. *Are they really dead?* Hoping they were alive, Ash stretched a single pair of wings and took off from the rooftop. He soared up into the night sky until he could see the top of Kordak's tower. As he neared the building, Ash could see the flashing lights of police vehicles coming down the long road leading to the front entrance of the tower.

Ash flew in the gaping hole that Kordak had made earlier. The sight that greeted him was as horrifying as what Todd Hunter had told him only minutes before. The first thing that caught Ash's eyes was the trail of blood that was smeared as if some fur had crawled from one side of the room to the next. Indeed, this was so. Cole and Jake lie next to each other. Cole was the one that had crawled. He had tried to get closer to Jake as the leopard had been bleeding to death. His paw had stretched out to grip Jake's own blood splattered one. Ash saw one of the athames they had used embedded in Jake's abdomen. Another was in Ash's apparently deceased

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mother. The third lay beside the dead leopard, where he had dropped it. Ash bent down and rolled Cole over so he could see his face. A large scar reached from one side of his face to the other. His chest had also been sliced from right shoulder to left hip. It would have taken great strength of will to pulled himself across the floor.

Not wanting to look into Cole's dead eyes anymore, Ash turned away and began looking for Cassie. He walked around the room, his eyes roving over the unconscious bodies of the trained soldiers. Ash caught sight of Cassie. She was lying face down on the floor in a puddle of blood. Ash ran to her and lifted her from the floor. He turned her over so he could see her face. She coughed. *She's alive!* Her paws were clamped down over a large wound in her abdomen. Her crimson blood was oozing from the wound. She could not have been like this for too long and there was no knowing for how much longer she would remain like this. He cradled her head in his arms for a few minutes before she opened her lavender eyes. Cassie looked up into Ash's face and gave him a weak smile. He returned the smile then looked down to examine her wound. A good-sized chunk of flesh and muscle was missing from her midriff. Her fur and clothes were matted with blood. There was no way to stop the bleeding. Cassie was going to die.

And I can't save her.

"Ash?" Her voice was hushed and scratchy.

"What, Cass?" There was no point in telling her not to speak, her racing heart was pumping blood too fast. "What's is it?"

"They were too strong for us. We didn't...stand a chance. We couldn't...."

Her words broke off as she gave a cough and blood trickled from the corners of her mouth. Ash bit back his tears as the sounds of many sirens blaring in concert with each other reached his ear through the hole in the wall. Ash knew that the sirens had been called to the

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tower and that squads of police officers would be making their way upstairs shortly. The fox turned his face back to Cassie. He had to do something. He had to try and save her or else he would hate himself for the rest of his natural life. What could be done? Healing others was not in his repertoire of powers given to him by his bonding with Un. The abilities Un gave him were strength, magic, speed and flight. *Speed and flight!* That was it. That was all he would need. Ash stood and lifted Cassie. She felt surprisingly light in his arms. Ash turned to the hole in the wall. A helicopter dropped into view through the hole. The chopper rotated to the left to reveal a fur hanging out the side with a high-powered sniper rifle. A ding from the other side of the room drew Ash's attention to the elevator.

The doors opened and eight officers stepped out with their guns raised. Behind them came detectives Bill Madsen and Penelope Halliwell. Both their eyes widen in surprise when they saw Ash. He was indeed a sight to see. Ash stood in the center of the room without a shirt, holding a dying catgirl in his arms. His pants and his fur were stained with blood, both his and others'. Ash looked from the two detectives back down to Cassie. She had managed to open her eyes and look imploringly up into Ash's. Ash nodded then turned back to Madsen and Penny. Neither made a move to lower their weapons, but so to, did neither squeeze the trigger of their firearms. A soft sound coming from outside warned Ash to duck, but not soon enough. A speeding bullet ripped into the left side of Ash's head and exploded out of the right side. Blood and chunks of grey matter issued forth to follow in the path of the bullet. Penny gasped and Madsen screamed something into a walkie-talkie. Cassie gave a low whimper.

Ash stood quite still for a fur that had just had a bullet tear through his head at almost nineteen hundred miles per hour. This and the fact that Ash appeared to still be breathing attributed to the confusion felt amongst the law enforcement fursonnel in the room. Ash closed

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his eyes for a moment and the healing process began. The hole in his head glowed until it vanished, leaving behind only the flecks of blood that had landed on his shoulder. Some of the officers gasped, but most just raised their brows in mixed awe and confusion. Ash looked them over once more then turned his back on them. The air around him seemed to ripple as two large orange-feathered wings appeared and extended from his shoulder blades. He started walking towards the hole. The helicopter pilot must have seen what happened because he began to pull away from the tower, as Ash got closer. Ash looked down at Cassie to reassure her.

“Hold on.”

Ash stepped through the hole and took flight. The astonished pilot stared after the soaring fox, but did not give chase. Ash expanded a bubble of energy around both him and Cassie to keep them warm against the freezing wind and the snow that had begun to fall. A moan of pain escaped Cassie’s lips. Ash glanced down at her. Her eyes were closed and she was still, but she was also breathing. Her only hope was for Ash to get her to a hospital. Ash flew as fast as he could without dropping her. He pushed from his mind his thoughts of what questions the hospital employees would ask him. He did not care. Ash only wanted not to lose Cassie. He had been too late to help Jake and Cole, but Cassie was still alive.

A thought appeared in the back of his mind. If Cassie was still living, why then had the portion of the trispiritum that represented her vanished with the other two? Ash looked ahead and saw the building that was the Community-General Hospital of Clawson. He flew a little faster as he began to notice that Cassie had slipped into unconsciousness. *Don’t die on me!* When he arrived at the hospital he descended quickly to the entrance and walked into the reception area. Ash walked up to the first doctor he found and asked him to look at Cassie. The

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doctor was a rabbit with brown fur. He had a medical chart in one paw and a pen in the other. The doctor responded without turning to look at him.

“I’m a little busy right now, furiend.”

Ash glared at the back of the doctor’s head for a minute. Becoming agitated, Ash placed Cassie down on the empty gurney beside him and stepped around the doctor to face him. The doctor still seemed very disinterested in Ash’s problem and only raised an eyebrow, as he made note of his bloodstained fur. The rabbit’s roving eyes seemed to miss the two wings on Ash’s back. Ash pressed the doctor.

“Please, you have to help me. My furiend is dying.”

The doctor glanced around at Cassie lying on the gurney. He shrugged and looked back at his chart. “There’s nothing I can do.”

“Nothing you can do.” Ash muttered the words as his anger swelled inside him. With a lightning fast jerk of his right shoulder blade, Ash shot his wing out and pinned the doctor against the wall. “Goddamn it! That’s not good enough! I fought through hell to save her and I’m not going to let you stand there and do nothing! Help her!”

Ash either frightened the doctor into compliance or had created a big enough scene that compelled the doctor to at least examine her, because the doctor moved to Cassie then called to a nurse with a list of supplies he would need and for a few extra packets of plasma. Pushing past Ash, the doctor wheeled Cassie down the hall and into an operating room. Ash followed the gurney. His wings folded in on themselves and vanished as Ash stopped at the door to the operating room. Two nurses and another doctor walked into the door. One of the nurses was carrying a tray with freshly sterilized tools lying on it. She placed the tray on a table for the doctor. The other nurse set up the machines that would keep track of Cassie’s vital signs. The

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doctor pulled on a pair of latex gloves while the other doctor lifted Cassie's shirt to examine her wound. The doctor reached for a set of long tweezers. He inserted the tweezers into the wound and pulled out something small and silver.

When he pulled it out, blood shot into the air. The doctors began working fast, the nurses handing them the instruments as they asked for them. Ash watched them through the glass window. He did not know how long they had been working. Ash stepped back from the window to the opposite wall and slid to the floor. Now that he had a chance to slow down, his legs began to ache. His shoulders hurt as well due to the power of his flapping wings. It was also the first time that he consciously noticed the patches of dried blood on his fur. There was a large area on his chest where he had held Cassie close during the flight. A shaft of light fell across Ash's face. He turned his head and looked out a window at the end of the hall. The sun was rising. He had not realized that it was so close to morning. Had he been quick enough to get to Cassie? He would soon learn the answer, as the door to the operating room opened and one of the nurses walked out and turned down the hall.

Ash rose and looked through the open door. The second doctor took a step back and wiped his brow with the back of his paw, the fingers of the latex glove red with blood. The other doctor, the one Ash had frightened earlier, straightened and said something quietly to the other nurse. She nodded and left the room followed by the second doctor. Neither of them said anything to Ash nor did they even look at him. They were avoiding his eyes. The first doctor grabbed the sheet they had laid across Cassie's legs and pulled it up over her head. The revelation hit Ash like a massive tidal wave of anguish and hatred. He had never felt pain like this before. Not even when his own mother had died in his arms barely three days prior. *But she wasn't my real mother. This was the Cassie I had come to love as a sister.* Tears flowed from

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his eyes again. He fell to his knees in the middle of the hospital hallway and cried. The doctor walked to Ash and pulled him up and led him into the room. He lowered Ash into a chair next to the bed and pulled the sheet from over Cassie's face.

She looked peaceful, any prior pain betrayed only by the dried blood at the corners of her mouth and the cut across her forehead. The doctor moved to the door and closed it. He turned and watched Ash for a few moments. He noticed now the patches of fur and clothing that had been discolored by blood. This only served to solidify a few questions he had thought of asking. However, being a kind soul, he decided to wait and let the fox calm down and compose himself. Ash reached up and touched Cassie's cheek. He pushed a few strands of hair that had fallen in her face out of the way. It suddenly dawned on Ash that he was now completely and utterly alone. His three friends from his own world were now all dead. Todd Hunter, who had proven to be a friend in the end, was gone, impaled on Ash's blade. He was the only one left. Him and Kordak. *Wherever the hell he is?* The doctor stepped forward and cleared his throat. Ash turned his head to look at the doctor. The doctor began.

"There was something lodged in the wound that had been staunching the flow of blood. We removed it and she began hemorrhaging. We worked as fast as we could and as long as we could. Each time we closed off one point of an escape another would open up larger. We did what we could, but she bled out. I'm sorry."

"Thank you." There was not much more for Ash to say. "What did you pull out of her?"

"It looked like a claw. It was quite a bit longer than normal, but it was a claw, possibly canine."

"You could tell that from the claw?"

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The doctor merely shrugged. Ash began to wonder if the doctor maybe suspected him of stabbing her. The thought disgusted Ash. How dare this rabbit even think such a thing? Hostility must have shown on Ash's face, because the rabbit turned away and opened the door. He stopped and looked back at Ash.

“Do you know a Cory?”

Ash's left ear flattened against his head in confusion. “No. Why?”

“It was something she said before she died. Something about some fur named Cory and his father being in Furrtown. Something like that. I don't know. I'll leave you alone now.”

The doctor turned and left the room. Ash thought about what the rabbit had said Cassie's dying words were. *Cory!?* Ash was dumfounded. *Who the fuck this Cory was?* He had never met a fur named Cory nor did he know if Cassie had either. Ash sat down in the chair and placed his forehead in his paws. Ash looked up and glanced at Cassie's peaceful countenance. Ash found himself wishing that she would wake, smile at him and say that everything was going to be all right, but he knew she would not. Whatever powers the demon brand had granted her, resurrection was not one of those. She was gone forever. So were Jake and Cole. They were all gone and Ash was left in this hellish world alone. Ash's mind drifted back to what the doctor had told him. *Furrtown*. All of Ash's furiends had been in Furrtown. Most of them were still there. Including Cassie's father.

“Paul. He doesn't know.” Ash spoke these words aloud. He turned to look at Cassie. “Your father needs to know. I have to tell him.” Ash leaned in and kissed her on the forehead. “Good-bye.”

Ash pulled the sheet over her head and took the bracelets the doctors had removed from her wrists. Leaving the hospital room, he turned down the hall where he was greeted by a squad

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of armed police officers lead by detective Penny Halliwell. The slender doe took a few steps away from where the other officers had stopped to raise their weapons. She kept her gun trained on him, but held out her left palm as a sign that she wanted to talk and not open fire. The fact that she would not lower the gun told him that what she had seen earlier made her fear him. Ash also found that he did not care if she feared him or not. He had to get to Furrtown to see Cassie's father and he wanted to leave now. The doe standing in his way was just one minor obstacle that needed to be overcome. Ash realized that he was actually contemplating going through her if she did not move willingly. His friends' deaths had hit him harder than even he had initially realized. He looked hard into the doe's eyes and waited.

"Mr. Reynolds? Do you remember me? We met the other day at your...."

"I know who you are, detective Halliwell. I also would like for you to get out of my way."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Reynolds, but I can't do that."

"Can't, or won't?"

"Take your pick, but I can't let you leave until you tell me what happened to the fur you took from that tower?"

"She's in there." He indicated the room he had just left. "She's dead."

"How did she die?"

"Lost too much blood."

"Shot?"

"Stabbed."

"By who?"

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Ash did not answer. How could he tell her that a dead wolfgirl who had been brought back to life by a demon had stabbed Cassie in the abdomen? Ash could barely even believe it.

“Mr. Reynolds?”

“Are you going to get out of my way, or not?”

Now, it was Penny’s turn to remain silent. Ash wondered what she would do? He did not have to wait long for his answer. She squeezed the trigger of her gun and a bullet flew at Ash and tore into his chest. A fur down the hallway screamed. Ash ignored the scream and the pain and advanced on Penny. The wound healed as he walked and the pain vanished. Ash stepped closer to Penny until the barrel of her gun was pressed against his chest. He stared into her eyes, as if daring her to pull the trigger again. She looked back into his eyes and saw the look of a fur who would rather be dead. She stepped back and lowered her gun then motioned for the other officers to do the same. Grudgingly, they lowered their weapons and move out of Ash’s way. Ash walked past them without looking at them. He stepped out the entrance and saw the police cruisers and two more squads of officers. They raised their weapons, but did not get a chance to fire. Ash spread his large wings and flew away into the early morning sky.

* * *

FURRTOWN loomed on the horizon. The skyline was dominated by the tall shape of the Atlas Incorporated office building. Ash flew towards it and circled the top a couple of times as the memory of that day’s battle drifted into his mind. He soared high over the city. He looked down at himself and saw the blood. *I can’t go talk to Paul looking like this.* And he could not walk into a clothing store and buy new clothes then get a motel room. Not only did he look like hell,

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he had no money. He needed a place to hide and to get cleaned up. A place no fur would even consider going inside. A place that essentially screamed ‘STAY AWAY!’ when looked at. A place with crime scene tape stretched across the front door.

“I hope you don’t mind, Jake, but your house is the safest place I can think of.”

Ash banked to the left and angled towards the neighborhood where Jake’s house was situated. As he flew past tall office buildings, he saw furs working early on this cold Saturday morning. Those he noticed that noticed him, dropped what they were doing and stared out the window in awe. Ash rolled over and dropped lower towards the ground. Furs walking on the streets below looked up and pointed. Adults gasped and children called out in wonder. The gasps and calls did not bother Ash. At least, they did not bother him as much as having to go tell Paul Archer that his only kitten had been brutally murdered. Ash was not even sure if he should tell him. *No, he has to know and I have to tell him.* Cassie was dead because of him anyway, right? He had let her and Jake and Cole come along and they had died when he decided to chase Kordak down. *Hadn’t I?* Ash did not seem sure about anything anymore. He had promised to get Cassie, Cole and Jake home, but all he had gotten them was killed.

The subdivision where Jake’s house was located was approaching quickly as he increased his speed. Ash flew low over the numerous houses until he caught sight of Jake’s somewhere off to his right. He turned towards the house and flew towards it. Ash flew around the house and settled down in the backyard. The snow-covered grass crunched under his shoes as they touched the ground. Ash walked across the white lawn and stepped up to the back door. He reached out and grabbed the handle of the sliding door. He pulled and the door gave way and slid open. *It’s unlocked?* Sliding the door open, Ash slipped inside and closed the door behind him. He locked it. He walked slowly through the dining room, placing Cassie’s bracelets on the counter, and

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into the living room. He stopped in front of a framed photograph sitting on a small table at the end of the couch. The photo showed three leopards. Ash recognized one as Victor. The young one must have been Jake at about five or six. The third leopard was a female with green eyes and long brown hair. Jake's mother. All three leopards were smiling up at Ash as he stared at the photo.

Ash placed his paw gently on top of the picture frame and looked down at the young five-year-old leopard grinning from ear to ear. As he stared, the image of the lifeless body of that same five-year-old leopard flashed through his mind. Ash turned away from the photo and turned it quickly so that the photo was facing the tabletop. After that, he did not look at another photograph in the entire house. He went straight upstairs and set to finding clothes that would fit him. He then walked to the bathroom to take a shower. Ash reached for the knob to turn on the water and noticed something staining the bathtub near the drain. Stooping to get a closer look, Ash discovered that it was blood that had not gotten washed away. Ash wondered whose blood it was. Though he would never know, the blood was Jake's. It had failed to get washed away when Cassie had stuck Jake in the shower after he had been shot. Deciding to ignore the blood, Ash turned on the water and waited for it to warm up.

He kicked off his shoes and stripped off the rest of his clothes. He looked himself over and noticed that he was covered in more blood than he had thought. The fur on the inside of his right leg was red and matted. Blood stained his arms and his chest and even his back. Most of the blood was his. Some of it was not. The large bloodstain that dominated his chest he had acquired while holding Cassie close as he flew her to the hospital. The coating of red on his paws was a layered mixture of blood from all three of his friends. The same mixture was smeared across his forehead where he had dropped his head into his paws. Ash walked back to

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the shower and tested the water with his paw. The warm water hit his paw and the blood began to moisten and be washed away. Ash stepped into the shower and stood under the water. The hot liquid flowed over his body and began washing away the blood of his friends. Ash looked down and watched the blood disappear down the drain.

Ash stayed in the shower until he had washed away every drop of blood he had acquired the night before. When he was done, he turned off the water and stood still for a few minutes, soaking wet and dripping. His ears sagged at the sides of his head from the water that had been retained by the fur on them. They also sagged with sorrow. The water flowing over his face had served two purposes. The water had carried away the blood that had dried in the fur on his forehead and had hidden the tears that had been surging from his bloodshot eyes. His chest continued to heave even though the tears had ceased. He had cried more in the past few hours than in his entire life. In the course of a week, he had learned what it felt like to lose everyfur he had ever cared about. Ash sat on the edge of the tub and held his head in his paws for a few moments longer. Losing them was hard enough. Telling the families would be much harder. But, Paul was the only one he could tell. The Sommerses had suffered enough loss over the years. Some of that loss had been at his own paws.

All of it. Cole was my fault.

A soft voice whispered in his ear. *You still need to tell them. There must be one of them who would be able to see that it was not your fault.*

“You mean Zach?”

Yes.

“Fine. I’ll talk to Zach. But, I’m going to see Paul Archer first.”

That is entirely up to you.

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Ash nodded. He rose and stepped out of the tub. Taking a towel, he dried himself off as best he could then slipped into the clothes he had found. The wardrobe consisted of a pair of black corduroy slacks, a white turtleneck shirt and a navy blue woolen pullover. He slid his bare hindpaws into his shoes and secured the laces. Leaving the bathroom, Ash walked downstairs and into the entrance hall. He opened a closet in the hall and found numerous coats for him to choose from. He found a black duffel coat, a beige trench coat and a dark brown jacket that terminated at the waist. Ash decided to take the black duffel coat, as it would provide the most warmth when he stepped outside. Ash turned to head through the kitchen towards the backdoor when he remembered something. The fox went back upstairs and into the bathroom where he had left his bloodstained pants. He reached into the pocket and pulled out the gold medallion he had removed from the collar. He palmed the gold coin then slipped it into the pocket of the corduroy slacks he was now wearing.

Ash went back down the stairs and out the backdoor, taking the bracelets from where he had left them. Snow had begun to fall while he had been inside getting cleaned up. His pawprints from earlier had all but been completely filled in by the fresh blanket of snow. Ash pulled on the duffel coat and slipped the four wooden walrus teeth to fasten the coat. The fox went to the fence and peered over at the houses across the desolate street. They all seemed dark. The inhabitants either still in bed, or already left for an early job on this Saturday morning. Ash slipped over the fence and walked out into the street and across to the sidewalk on the other side. He started down the sidewalk and navigated his way to the home of Paul Archer. Ash hoped that Paul would be home. The middle of Furrtown Medical Center was the last place Ash wanted to deliver the news. Ash rounded a corner and there it was. A house that Ash had only seen once, or twice, and now dreaded seeing again. The one-story house that belonged to Paul Archer and

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his daughter Cassie with its cream-colored, vinyl siding sat between two similar houses on the opposite side of the street.

There was a car parked in the driveway. *Paul's still home.* Ash took a deep breath and crossed the street. He walked across the white lawn and up to the front door. He raised his paw to knock on the door, but did not get the chance. The wooden door suddenly opened to reveal the startled figure of the panther that was Cassie's father. The look in his orange eyes was one of confusion and relief. There was a little worry in the feline's eyes as well and Ash made note of it. The panther chuckled a bit while he tried to catch his breath. When he looked back at Ash and saw his stoic expression, Paul's laughter died away. He stared back at Ash and furrowed his brow.

"Mr. Reynolds. You startled me. What can I do for you?"

"May I speak with you?"

"Say anything you like."

"Can I come in?"

Paul merely step aside to make way for Ash to walk into the house. Now that he saw it, Ash realized that he had never actually been inside the Archer's home before. He had only ever gotten as close as the sidewalk and that was only when he had been out walking with Calleigh, Micah and Cassie. The front door opened right up into the living room. The dining area and kitchen could both be seen from the front door. There was a short hallway leading off of the living room. The hall led to the two bedrooms belonging to Paul and Cassie and a single bathroom. Ash walked into the living room and looked around. The first thing that caught his eye was a portrait hanging over the fireplace. The portrait was of a beautiful female panther with black fur and hazel eyes. It could have been a portrait of Cassie except that the hair was too long

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and the pantheress in the image was older than Cassie. *So, that's her mother.* Ash took a couple more steps into the room then stopped. He turned to face Paul.

“Can we sit down?”

“Does this have anything to do with your illness?”

“No, it doesn't. It...” Ash choked on his words. He could not bring himself to say them.

“What's wrong?”

Ash still could not get the words to come out. So, he let his actions speak for him. The fox reached into the large pocket of the duffel coat and removed the two silver bracelets. He placed them gently on the small table between him and Paul. The panther stared down at the bracelets for a few moments. Paul seemed at a loss for words. He leaned forward and lifted the bracelets from the table and held them close. He turned them over and over in his paws as if looking for something in particular. Paul looked back at Ash. The fox found that he had to force himself to meet the feline's eyes. Ash had seen the same look in the eyes of other furs. It was a look that made Ash feel like he was being accused of something. Paul sat forward in his chair.

“Where did you get these?” Paul paused, but not long enough for Ash to answer.

“Where's my daughter!?”

“She's...”

“What did you do to my daughter, you bastard!?”

“Paul, please. Let me explain!”

“Paul? Why did you call me that? We've only met twice.”

“I'm sorry if my being informal offends you, but there's something more important I have to tell you.”

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“First, tell me where my daughter is?”

“This is about your daughter. I took those bracelets from her.”

“What was she doing with you?”

“This demon in Clawson had done something very bad. Something that affected myself, your daughter and two other furs. I was going to try and fix what he had done and Cassie was going to help.”

“She just turned seventeen! What were you thinking letting her go up against a demon!?”

“I tried to convince her that she didn’t have to come, but she wouldn’t listen. None of them would. I guess I didn’t try hard enough.”

“Where is my...?”

“She’s dead.”

Paul’s heart stopped for a second when Ash said these words. “No.”

“I’m sorry, but it’s true. When I found her, she was still alive. I rushed her to the hospital and they did what they could, but she died. I’m so sorry. I never meant for that...”

Ash stopped talking when Paul raised his paw. The panther sat in his chair, staring at the two silver bracelets. The two bracelets that were the only thing he had to remember his beloved daughter now that she was gone. Ash could tell this was hard for him to accept. *Hell, it’s hard for me to accept and I saw her body.* Ash started thinking that it was about time he left. The fox bowed his head then rose from the chair. Paul caught the movement and rose as well. He followed Ash a little ways towards the door before speaking again.

“Why her?”

“Excuse me?” Ash answered without turning.

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Paul seized Ash's shoulder and spun him around then brought his other paw up and slashed Ash badly across his face. Ash stumbled back. His vision became blurred by the blood running into his eyes.

"Why did my daughter have to die and not you?"

Ash looked back at Paul and did not respond immediately. The four gashes across his face began to glow and heal, leaving only the blood behind to stain his fur.

"Believe me when I say that I wish I had died. I'm only here because Cassie made it so I couldn't die." Ash turned to leave, but stopped. "I'm sorry about Cassie, but do you know if she knew a fur named Cory?"

"What?" Watching Ash's face heal had taken the fight out of the bereaved panther. "No. No fur she ever spoke of, at least."

"All right. Thank you. It was... one of the last things she said."

"What else did she say?"

"She told me to tell you that she would always love you." He knew it was a lie, but Ash felt bad for Paul.

"Thank you. I'm sorry I slashed your face."

"Forget about it. Cassie's body is at Community-General in Clawson."

"Thank you. Where do you go from here?"

"I don't know."

* * *

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ASH stood in front of the Sommers residence and knocked once. He had made a stop by Jake's house to wash the dried blood from his face then had walked here. Ash had rung the doorbell and was now waiting for the door to open. It did. In the doorway stood Mr. Sommers, whom Ash had seen just one week ago. The wolf of fifty years gave a wide grin when he saw Ash standing on his front porch. Before Ash could speak, he was being ushered inside and led into the living room where this world's Ash had attacked Zach and the twins. Ash looked around the room. Mrs. Sommers was sitting in a chair by a roaring fire doing needlework. Zach was in his wheelchair positioned in front of the fire with his paws clasped in his lap, the light of the flames shimmered in his blue eyes. Both wolves faced Ash when he entered the room. Mr. Sommers walked around and resumed his seat on the couch with a newspaper folded in his lap. Mr. Sommers was the first of them to speak.

"Well, you look like you've been doing well. How's your head?"

"It's fine."

"His head?" Mrs. Sommers seemed confused.

"This is the young fox that I found outside in the street last Saturday, dear."

"Oh. It's a pleasure to meet you. This is our eldest son, Zach. Please, have a seat. Can I get you anything?"

"No, thank you." Ash did not sit down, but he nodded to Zach.

"Our other kids aren't home. We're kinda worried. We haven't seen Calleigh since Thursday night. Cole's been gone since late Tuesday night. They were here that night you hit your head. Calleigh talked to you in the hospital."

"Yeah, I remember. I'm actually here to talk about them. There's something you should know."

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“What? Did something happen to them?”

Ash swallowed. “Cole’s been with me for the past few days. I only saw Calleigh just last night.”

“Well, are they all right?” Mrs. Sommers sat forward as she spoke.

“I’m sorry to have tell you this, but your son and daughter are dead.”

Mrs. Sommers covered her mouth with her paws. Mr. Sommers half rose from his place on the couch. “What?”

“No, it’s not true. You’re lying.”

“Why would I lie, Mrs. Sommers? What reason would I have to lie?”

Mrs. Sommers looked back at Ash, tears rolling down her cheeks. Mr. Sommers continued to rise. His paws had balled into fists. Ash moved quickly and sat down on the coffee table next to Zach.

“You can look in my mind. You decide if I’m lying, or not.”

Zach turned his chair to face Ash and wheeled it closer to the fox. He reached out a paw and placed it over Ash’s heart. Ash was suddenly thrown back to the night before when he had found his friends dead. Ash watched himself turn over Cole’s body and stare into his lifeless eyes. The roomed changed slightly. Ash was now standing in the room as it had appeared before he had had to chase Kordak out of the hole in the wall. Calleigh was just lowering her hood to reveal her face. Ash felt something on his chest twitch and realized that it was Zach’s paw. The Sommers’ began to slowly shimmer back into view. Zach removed his paw and sat back in his wheelchair. The two canine’s eyes met for a moment, with Zach looking away first. The wolf simply nodded. Ash returned the gesture and rose from the table. He did not look at

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Mr. or Mrs. Sommers. He was not sure he could handle the looks. Ash headed for the door, but was stopped when his ear twitched twice.

Ash, I have located Kordak. He is here. In Furrtown. And, I found somefur that I never thought I'd ever see again.

“Who?”

My father. Kordak's father.

“Cory. She didn't say Cory. She was trying to tell me that Kordak came to Furrtown.”

“Who are you talking to?” It's was Zach's voice that reached his ears.

Come, we must hurry. I can guide you to where they are.

“All right.”

Ash put his paw on the doorknob and turned it. Ash stepped through the door and walked into the lawn. The three wolves followed him outside and watched him to see what he was going to do. Ash turned to look at them. He gave them a small smile of comfort.

“I'm going to get the one who killed your children.”

The two wings appeared and spread from his shoulder blades, his one tail split into nine. The wolves stared at him in wonder. Ash turned and kicked off from the ground and soared into the midday sky. He gave in and let Un take full control for the first time in all the years they had been bonded together. When he did, luminescent blue armor appeared over his entire body and his deep orange fur and feathers turned to shining gold. His eyes became two orbs of bright glowing blue energy. The houses below became nothing more than streaks as the angel fox flew at top speed overhead. The residences became buildings as he flew into the city. Buildings flashed by on either side as the golden fox flew low through the city. After a few minutes, Ash,

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guided by Un, turned down a street that contained a twelve-story building with windows all along the building except for the top floor. The floor that contained the gathering hall.

Ash set down in front of the entrance and walked in. The golden furred fox stepped into the entrance hall and scanned the room with his glowing blue eyes. The fur behind the reception desk called out and a security guard came running around the corner. The guard pulled his revolver from its holster and aimed it at Ash's chest. Three shots rang out. Three sizzles and wisps of smoke rose from the armor protecting Ash's heart. The guard fired again. Two more bullets impacted on the armor and burned away without harming Ash. The third, however, ripped into Ash's unprotected throat and exploded out the back of his neck. He stumbled backwards a little from the force. He felt the blood running from the wound and down his chest and back, but he continued forward. The wound in his throat healed. Ash walked past the guard and up to the reception desk. He looked down at the frightened female coyote sitting behind the desk and spoke. His voice and Un's came out simultaneously, lending a reverberating effect to the words that came out.

“How do I get up to see your boss?”

“Take the elevator up to the thirteenth floor. The button is hidden behind the emergency stop button.”

“Thank you.”

Ash turned and walked to the elevator. He pressed the button and waited for the car. When it arrived, Ash stepped in. The car was not the largest he had been in, so he had to pull his wings in closer than they had been. He looked down and found the emergency stop button. Ash flipped it aside and pushed the button marked with the red *13*. The elevator started up slowly. When the digital screen indicated that the thirteenth floor had been reached, the walls started

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glowing red and closing in on Ash. Ash looked down. The red walls seemed to be trying to disintegrate his body, but was having difficulty because of the armor. The field continued to close around him, but could not harm him. The armor began to glow brighter and brighter. Visible cracks started appearing in the red energy walls. A shockwave of blue energy emanating from Ash shattered the red walls. The elevator cart became a small room with a desk. The male fur behind the desk rose quickly and pulled a gun from under the desk. He pointed it at Ash, but did not get the chance to fire it. A thin beam of blue energy melted through the back of the gun and rendered the hammer useless. The fur stared back in surprise and fear at Ash. The fox walked over to the fur and took the gun from his paw and placed it gently on the desk between them.

“Please inform your master that he has visitors.”

“Visitors?”

“Just do it.”

The fur reached for the intercom and activated it. He relayed the information while Ash waited. As he waited, the armor, wings and extra tails vanished and his fur resumed its normal pigmentation. He looked his normal self except for the blood staining his shirt and coat. The clerk’s eyes were wide in astonishment. A confirmation buzz came from the machine and the sound of a door unlocking was followed by the only door swinging open. Ash walked through the door and found a winged lion standing in the middle of the room. The door closed behind Ash and locked. Ash glanced back over his shoulder and found Kordak standing behind him. There were strange markings on his body. The markings were over his heart, on his wrists and on his back between his wings. Ash wondered what they were for. The lion took a step towards Ash and looked him over.

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“Who are you and why are you here?”

“My name is Ash Reynolds.” His voice was his own. “And, I’m here to kill the demon Kordak for the evil things he has done.”

“I’m sorry, but I cannot allow that. I will have to stop you if you persist.”

“You will try.”

The lion angel’s wings began to shimmer and then morphed into the leathery wings of a demon. *So, the angel protecting Furrtown is really a demon controlling it.* Two flaming swords appeared in the lion’s paws. Ash glanced back over his shoulder and saw that Kordak was holding his own sword as well. Kordak kicked Ash in the back and sent him stumbling towards the lion. Both of the flaming swords stabbed into Ash’s stomach. *I really should have seen that one coming.* The lion leaned in and whispered into Ash’s ear.

“I told you what would happen if you did not leave.”

“And, I told you that you would *try*.”

Ash’s knee lashed up and caught the demon in the stomach. The lion stumbled backwards, pulling the two swords from Ash’s gut. Ash heard Kordak moved behind him. He ducked under the swinging sword then elbowed him in the jaw. Ash spun away and stood facing both demons. The fox held out his paw and summoned his own sword. When the sword appeared, so too did the wings, tails and armor and his fur returned to its golden state. A shield now appeared on his left arm. The shield was decorated with a brightly glowing symbol on it. The symbol of Un. The two demons’ eyes widened. They glanced at one another then made ready to fight. The lion attacked first. Ash raised the shield to block the dual blades. He turned and brought his sword around to parry a blow from Kordak. He turned again. Ash hit Kordak in the chest with the shield and blocked two swings from the lion with his own sword. The lion’s

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blades and Ash's own met a few more times before Ash got one through the defense and sliced the tip across the demon's chest. He pivoted and cut into Kordak's left thigh before pulling back to watch his enemies.

Red blood stained Kordak's pant's leg but the bleeding had stopped and the wound had healed. Ash turned his eyes on the other demon and noticed that black blood had begun and continued to flow from the wound. The slice across his chest would not heal. Kordak placed his left paw on the lion's shoulder to steady him. Ash stood ready for an assault. His eyes darted from one demon to the next. And, despite his best efforts, a question kept popping into his head. *Why had the lion's wound not healed like Kordak's had?* Being distracted by questions at this time might get him killed. Assuming he could die while he was bonded to Un. The lion straightened up and gave his two swords one good twirl each. The sword in his left paw he twirled again so that his grip was reversed. He touched the pommels of the two swords together and they fused. The lion's dual swords had become one double-bladed sword. Ash raised his shield in front of him and pulled the sword back with the tip pointing down towards the floor. The sword was poised to be swung through an upwards arc. Kordak attacked first. He lunged at Ash, his sword coming down towards the fox's head.

The shield was up in a flash to protect Ash from the flaming blade. As Kordak's blow connected with the shield, Ash brought his own sword up and sliced into Kordak's side. The blade might have continued through the demon's torso and out his right shoulder had Kordak not seized Ash's wrist and stopped him. Kordak raised his sword again and slashed downward. This time though, Ash could not position the shield soon enough. The blade cut into his shoulder and continued down until it had sliced into his left lung. Ash gasped for air. The lion used this moment to strike. He walked around behind Kordak to stand to Ash's left. He spun his weapon

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over his head then brought it around and imbedded the blade firmly in the lower part of Ash's back. Ash grabbed the burning blade with his paw as he let the shield clatter to the floor and vanish. Summoning all of his strength, Ash pushed the blade out of his back then kicked Kordak in the stomach to separate the two of them. Ash felt the wound in his lower back healing as he stumbled backwards a little.

He stabbed the tip of his sword into the floor to free his paw then pulled off the shredded duffel coat. Ash pulled the sword from the floor and gripped the hilt with both paws. Now, it was his turn to attack first. Ash kicked forward and flew at his enemies. He rotated in midair and hit Kordak hard in the face with the bottoms of his thick-soled shoes. As Kordak tumbled backwards, Ash fell to the ground and came up swinging his sword at the lion. Their blades met over and over. Ash's blade covered in blue energy and swinging silently through the air. The lion's double blades burned with red flames and made an evil hiss as they cut through the room's still air. After nearly losing a wing, Ash closed them and they vanished. This gave him more freedom of movement. Ash somersaulted over the lion and, reversing his sword, stabbed the demon in the back. Ash twisted the blade before removing it. A low gurgling noise passed the lion's lips as he slumped to the floor and lie motionless. An angered scream came for behind Ash.

“Father! NOOOOOOOO!”

Ash spun and saw Kordak rising to his hindpaws. His right paw tightened around the hilt of his sword as he rose. Ash raised his sword as the distraught demon launched at him. The tip of Ash's sword pierced the center of the demon's chest and through his heart and out of his back. The symbol painted over his heart was therefore broken by the blade. There was a concussive release of red energy with its epicenter at Kordak's heart. The shockwave threw Ash backwards

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into a wall. Ash looked back at where Kordak was standing and saw only Bryan Mayer. The mortal bear that had been joined with the demon Kordak dropped to his knees as the blood continued to flow from his chest. With the demon destroyed, there was no way for the bear to survive. *He deserves to die for what he's done.* At any rate, there was nothing Ash could do to save him had he wanted to do so. Ash watched as Bryan fell forward and lay still, a pool of deep red blood forming around him.

“It’s done. Good-bye, Cassie. Cole. Jake. I’m sorry I couldn’t do more for you guys.”

Ash turned and left the room. He had to threaten the fur outside to activate the elevator so he could leave the building. He left the elevator and walked across the entrance hall, drawing glances from all as he passed. His clothes were torn and covered in blood for the second time in two days. When Ash stepped out of the front doors, he was greeted by the sight of a SWAT van and numerous police cruisers. He had seen so many of those in the past week that he was not even phased. Ash sighed. He took a few more steps to put some distance between him and the building behind him. Ash opened his wings and stretched them out to either side. Some of the officers lowered their weapons while some others gripped them tighter to keep from shaking. Ash kicked off from the street and flew into the now afternoon sky as a light snow began to fall. The fox soared high over the city. He turned towards his left and headed back to Jake’s house. He set down in the backyard of the house and entered the domicile. Ash walked into living room and dropped onto the floor and leaned against the bookcase. He sat there for a few moments before tears welled up in his eyes and began running down his cheeks. He cried for a long time before he was able to calm himself down.

“Good-bye, Calleigh. I love you.”

THE END