

# ~Stairway to Heaven~

© Ashen AngelFox, 2008

*Do not alter or redistribute in any fashion*

*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](mailto:ashen.angelfox@gmail.com).*

ASH sat on the floor, leaning against the bookshelf. He had gone back to Jake's house. It was the only place he knew of that had books that might be able to get him out of this world and back home. But, what about Cassie and Cole? And Jake? Were they gone forever? For the first time in a long time, Ash felt completely powerless to do anything. Or, to save anyfur. Everyfur he had known in this world was now either afraid of him, dead or out to kill him. Or, in some cases, some combination of the three.

He glanced down at the book resting on top of his right paw. That particular book seemed to Ash to be at least a thousand years old, maybe older. The book was divided into different sections depending on what the reader wanted to know. The book lay open to the section on teleportation and dimensional travel. Ash had been flipping through this book for nearly half an hour. He decided to give up looking for the present. His head was pounding from the hours on intense concentration. Ash tossed the book onto a small pile growing at his hindpaws and rubbed his eyes.

The spell book was the twenty-third book he had looked through. It was also the twenty-third book he had tossed aside. None of the books had given him any clue as to how to transport

ASHEN SKIES  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

him further than the next state, let alone another dimension. Ash took a deep breath to clear his head. His thoughts turned to Cassie, never to be together with Micah again. *Micah!* Ash suddenly remembered that his brother and the rest of his friends and family were hunting him and trying to kill him.

“What did Kordak do to you?”

Ash hit the bookcase with the back of his head. A book tumbled off the top shelf and hit Ash on the top of his head. Ash glared up at the bookcase and began rubbing the bump on his head. He glanced down at the book lying open on the floor. The book had fallen open to a section concerning zombies and the undead. Ash eyed the bookshelf again. This time, he was wondering in the bookcase was trying to tell him something. Ash looked back at the book and found himself almost afraid to touch it. But, only almost. He picked it up and held it in both paws. The book was actually a journal written by a fur named James Browning. Scanning the page, Ash searched for anything that might be useful.

*‘There is nothing more tiresome than your typical zombie, or any undead creature for that matter. The easiest way, they say, to kill the undead is to cut off their head and place it between their hindpaws. Not sure where they got that from, but okay. I think the best way is to just shoot them through the heart with a silver bullet. If you don’t have a gun or the bullets, any weapon made of silver should suffice. The key, though, is to go for the heart. If the heart is sufficiently destroyed, the undead will die. Oh, and burning the body afterwards might not be a bad idea either.’*

Ash lowered the journal for a moment. The supposition that his former friends and family had been turned into zombies of some sort fit with what Ash already knew. Each of them had been dead, but were no longer; ergo, the undead. However, what Ash knew about zombies

ASHEN SKIES  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

told him that they were among the dumbest of all creatures considered undead. These spoke clearly, not only spoke but they taunted and they planned out their moves. No normal zombie could do that. Still, something compelled Ash to keep reading the journal.

*'The methods I've described so far work great for you everyday, garden variety undead that most furs tangle with. There exists, however, a variety of revenants that one should hope never to meet. This variety we shall refer to as uber-zombies....'*

"'Frikin' awesome." Ash muttered to himself as he read.

*'...These uber-zombies are more closely related to the revenants of the Middle Ages. They have the uncanny ability to communicate with extreme coherency. They seem to be able to recall every minute of their former lives, particularly the one responsible for their death. Uber-zombies can only be created by high-level demons. These are more difficult to kill than their more common counterparts. This does not mean they cannot be destroyed....'*

Ash paused and thought for a moment on this last part. If they were so hard to kill, then how had Jake managed to kill Lilia so easily? Ash turned the page and read on.

*'...What makes these zombies so tough to deal with in that they can only die the way they died the first time. The difficulty then comes from whether or not you know how they died previously. If they were stabbed to death, then you must stab them to death as well. And, you must stab them the same number of times or it's wont hold and they'll heal. If this happens, you probably won't get a second chance.'*

Ash closed the book and began thinking over all of what he now knew. His friends and family had been turned into these enhanced revenants by Kordak, and later Dûrfëa. Ash had

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

to remember how they had all died. Micah, his brother, had been killed in a car crash along with his father, Jesse. Victor. According to Jake and Cole, he had been shot and apparently killed. That left Calleigh. Ash thought for a moment. He realized that he had never found out how she had died.

“Shit.” The word came as a borderline hiss. How could he kill her not knowing how she had died? She could have perished in any number of ways. And, with all of the demons and angels running around, Calleigh could have died in ways Ash would not be able to duplicate. He did not want to go ask her family. *Perhaps I could ask her?* Ash knew the thought was ludicrous. There was no way it would be that easy. Not where Kordak and his father were concerned. So, he was back to asking the family. He did not want it to come to that. He had already had to tell them that their youngest son was dead as well. What would they think of him asking how their daughter had died? It was morbid. It was unthinkable. It was...

His thoughts were interrupted by the sounds of shoes crunching snow coming from the front yard. Ash rose and stuffed the journal in his back pocket. Ash crossed the room and peered through the slats of the of the blinds. Victor and Jesse stood on the front lawn staring towards the house. Jesse’s right paw was surrounded by swirling light blue energy. *Damn.* Jesse’s paw lashed outward, sending a wave of energy towards the living room window. Ash jumped to his right, narrowly escaping the blast. Laughter drifted in through the newly opened hole in the wall. Ash sat up and peered over the edge of the hole. Victor and Jesse had begun walking towards the house. They moved very slowly. They were waiting for Ash to defend himself.

“Fine.”

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

Ash stood up and leapt through the hole. He hit the snow-covered ground and rolled to his hindpaws. When he came up, Ash threw two spheres of blue energy at his attackers. They ducked to either side. The energy balls flew past them and impacted on the road. Victor was the first to get to his hindpaws. He rushed at Ash and planted his fist in the fox's gut. All of the air was pushed from Ash's body. The fox tumbled backwards. He got to his knees, struggling to catch his breath. As he sat there, something struck him from behind. He fell over onto his back and saw his father standing over him. There was a rock clutched in his paws and there was blood on the rock.

"So, tell me, how does it feel having your head caved in?"

Ash stared up at his undead father for a moment. Jesse raised the rock over his head and made a move to smash it down on Ash's face. Ash rolled out of the way and stood up. The rock slammed into the snowy lawn where Ash's head had been. Ash's hindpaw lashed out and caught Jesse in the throat. Jesse stumbled back from Ash and clutched at his throat. Victor came up behind Ash and wrapped his arms around his neck. The fox struggled against the leopard for a minute before pitching himself forward and throwing Victor over his head. Victor collided with Jesse and the two crumpled to the ground.

Ash decided that it would be better to flee the residential area so no innocent bystander would get caught in this battle to the death. Ash turned from the two undead furs and kicked off into the air. He flew high into the sky. The soaring fox turned towards the mountains. Ash looked behind and saw the subdivision shrinking as he got further and further away. When he turned back, Victor was in front of him; his fist pulled back and ready to strike. Ash tried to veer left, but he was travelling too fast forward. Victor's fist swung out and connected with the side of Ash's head. He began tumbling through the air. Jesse flew up behind him and seized two

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

pawfuls of his sweater. Jesse spun around and threw Ash in the direction of downtown Furrtown.

Ash tumbled head over heels towards the buildings. He righted himself, but Victor was already upon him. His paws and hindpaws shot out in an endless assault. Ash kicked Victor and flew away. A glowing katana appeared in his paw. He turned and Victor was behind him. Victor's paws were glowing bright green. Ash flew at the oncoming leopard and pointed the tip of the sword at his chest. The blade pierced the leather jerkin he wore and sliced deep into his chest. Blood began to ooze past the blade. Ash gave the blade another push and the tip exploded through Victor's back. Ash made to pull the sword out, but Victor seized the blade with his paw. A thick-soled boot planted itself in Ash's solar plexus. The force of the kick sent Ash plummeting towards the ground. Ash looked back and saw Victor, with Ash's sword still in his chest, and Jesse flying after him.

Ash rotated over and saw the busy city road coming close to his face. Ash turned back over. His wings shot out to either side. Ash glided backwards for a while then floated up and landed on his hindpaws. Victor and Jesse touched down on the pavement. Victor pulled Ash's sword from his chest as he began to move close to the fox. Ash heard gasps and screams from the furs standing on the sidewalks. *This should never have gotten inside the city.* Victor suddenly broke into a run. Ash kicked off from the ground and launched at the leopard. The two met and Ash got in a few good punches before Victor stabbed Ash with his own sword. The fox stumbled back.

Ash gasped for air. He looked down and saw the hilt of the sword pressed against his chest. The blade had pierced his left lung and exited his back to slice into the muscle and bone of his wing. Victor punched him hard across his muzzle. Jesse appeared on his right and seized

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

his right wing as Ash staggered from the punch. Pulling, Jesse ripped the wing from Ash's back. Ash tripped over and fell to the pavement. Jesse and Victor began laughing again. Ash looked back and saw Jesse toss away the wing. Victor raised his paw and blasted Ash again. Ash felt the blast graze his back and take off his other wing, as well as the part of the blade piercing it. The sound of sizzling flesh and the smell of burning fur apprising him of the damage, Ash began to crawl away.

“Not so fast you murderous little bastard.”

Ash heard Jesse walk up behind him then felt a sharp pain in his ankle. Tears of pain ran from the corners of Ash's mouth. He tried not to cry out, but a low whimper escaped his lips. Ash looked down and saw the blade of a sword sticking in his ankle. Blood ran from the wound and pooled on the black asphalt. Ash turned over as best he could and tried reaching for the sword. Victor's shoe suddenly connected with his face, forcing him back down. Using his hindpaw, Jesse pushed the sword back and forth before pushing the blade all the way to the ground. The blade twisted and severed Ash's right hindpaw from the rest of his leg. This time Ash did cry out in pain.

“Son of a bitch!”

Victor bent low and grabbed the collar of Ash's sweater. “Now, is that any way to talk to your father?” Victor struck Ash across the muzzle.

“Fuck you!”

Ash seized Victor's jerkin and tore it open. There was a wound in the center of his chest, like a healed over bullet wound. Ash's blue eyes flared and began seething blue energy. The energy concentrated into two thin beams of pulsing plasma that shot forth and pierced Victor's chest at that point. Victor began screaming in pain and trying to pull away, but Ash held tightly.

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

The jerking burned where the beam hit, then the fur, followed by the flesh underneath. The thin column of energy tore through Victor's chest and burst out of his back. Victor gave one last cry and went limp. Blood began to run from the leopard's mouth. Ash let Victor fall to the ground beside him then tried to stand up. Jesse reached down and grabbed Ash by the throat before he could get up.

“Well, well, well. You managed to kill the great and powerful Victor O'Connell. Congratulations.” Jesse tightened his grip on Ash's throat and grabbed his ear. Jesse pulled and yanked the ear off along with some fur and skin from the scalp. “Never really liked the fucker anyway. Too egotistical.”

With a mere flick of his wrist, Jesse sent Ash sprawling through the air. Ash recovered from the spin and twisted in midair. He hit the ground, hindpaws first, only he had no right hindpaw. The bloody stump of his right leg hit the pavement and sent a wave of pain up through Ash's body. Ash crumpled into a heap on the black asphalt. *Un, I could really use some help right now.* Strength and warmth surged through his body. Ash reached up and pulled the sword from his chest. The wound healed at the blade exited his body. Letting the sword fall to the pavement, Ash began to stand up. When he raised his right leg, his hindpaw had completely grown back. He rose to his full height and stretched his neck to both sides. The fox glared down the street at the undead monster that was once his father.

A bright flash of blue light obscured Ash from view for a few seconds then vanished. When it did, Ash had changed. Before the entire world, there now stood a fox with nine tails, two wings and golden, glowing fur. Ash's clothes had disappeared and been replaced by a set of blue, ethereal armor. This new fox, *Un*, continued the glare Ash had begun, but with eyes of pure blue energy. Jesse growled deep in his throat and rushed towards the golden fox. Jesse's



*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

assault was stopped as an armor-plated fist connected with his jaw. The blow flung Jesse backwards and shattered his lower jaw. Un narrowed his eyes and spoke to Jesse.

“Give up now. You have no hope of winning.”

The voice echoed through the city. Jesse pulled himself to his knees, his bottom jaw hanging at a gruesome angle. With one paw, Jesse fixed his jaw and stood up. He moved and retrieved the blade he had used to sever Ash’s hindpaw. The golden fox watched him the whole time.

“So, be it.”

The words had barely begun to echo through the buildings, when the fox was on top of Jesse. Jesse began slashing at the armored fox. The blade glanced off the armor, leaving no sign of any contact. Un’s left paw shot out and grabbed Jesse’s wrist. With a twist, Jesse’s wrist was shattered and the short sword fell to the ground. Jesse pulled away and gave his limp paw a jerk and the bones healed. The two foxes leapt at each other and began trading blows. Each of Un’s was crippling and bone crunching. They fought all the way down the street to the corner. Jesse lashed out, catching Un in the throat with his curled fist. His right paw came up and seized Jesse’s wrist. He twisted his arm around and planted his other paw on the back of Jesse’s shoulder. Un bent low and whispered into Jesse’s ear.

“Where are the others?”

“I don’t know.”

Un put pressure on his shoulder. There was a loud cracking sound. “Don’t lie to me! Where are Micah and Calleigh?”

“Clawson. They’re in Clawson.”

“Thank you.”

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

Un's paws moved from Jesse's wrist and shoulder and clutched his shirt. Un stepped into the intersection and threw Jesse in the path of a large, oncoming flat nose truck. The fox practically bounced off the front of the truck and rolled for fifty feet. When he stopped, every bone in Jesse's body had been shattered and his head ripped off. The fox did not pull himself together. Jesse Reynolds and Victor O'Connell were gone. Calleigh Sommers and Micah Reynolds remained. The wings and tails began to melt in the fox's body. The armor started softening and became clothes like the ones Ash had been wearing. Ash turned around to look at where Victor's body had fallen and saw the journal he had taken lying beside him. *I hadn't realized it had fallen out.* Ash walked over and retrieved the journal.

The sounds of police sirens drifted towards his ear. *Guess I should go.* Ash looked up into the sky and lifted off from the pavement. Ash flew high up into the clouds and turned towards Clawson. He did not want to think about it, but plans of how to kill Micah and Calleigh began drifting through his head. Micah had died in a car accident some eight years back. Well, more accurately, he had burned to death when the car burst into flames. That would be easy to replicate. That left Calleigh. He still had not determined how she had died. If he did not find out before he had to fight her, he might never be able to defeat her.

"What am I gonna do?"

‡ ‡ ‡

*MICAH* and Calleigh stalked around the outside of an old warehouse. They had tracked Ash to this warehouse in Clawson and were now checking to see if it was a trap. Everything seemed fine from the outside. Anything Ash might have had planned would be awaiting them inside. Micah turned and motioned for Calleigh to wait outside while he went in. Calleigh nodded her assent and stood back from the door. Micah pushed the large door open wide enough for him to

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

squeeze through. The warehouse was dark. And, flooded. The floor seemed to have been covered in some liquid. Micah paid it no attention. A small light suddenly sprung to life in the dark of the room. The light illuminated the end of Ash's muzzle as he held the lighter under the cigarette between his lips.

“Since when did you start smoking, brother?”

Ash pulled the cigarette from his mouth and stared towards the silhouette of his younger, and undead, brother. “Since I found out how to kill you.”

Ash lowered his paw and let the cigarette fall to the floor, where it struck the layer of gasoline Ash had poured before they had arrived. The entire room was suddenly engulfed in flames. The flames lapped at Ash, but the protective barrier he had erected kept him from getting burned. Micah was not as lucky. Though the fox made to turn and run out of the warehouse, the flames had already begun to eat away at his clothes and fur. The soles of his boots were melting. Micah fell to his knees and screamed in agony. The door to the warehouse was pulled open further to reveal Calleigh standing outside.

Calleigh stood riveted in place as she watched Micah burn away into a pile of ashes. She glared up at Ash and rushed into the conflagration. The flames did not do any damage that was immediately repaired. *So, it wasn't by fire.* Ash lifted into the air and flew over Calleigh's head. The fox flew through the open door and looked back to see Calleigh soaring after him. The warehouse burnt to that ground in the distance, as Calleigh chased Ash across the night sky. He was not sure why, but something in the back of his head told him to head for downtown Clawson. Buildings began to whip past on either side of Ash as he flew into the city. Ash looked back and did not see Calleigh. His head shot back around to look ahead, but she was not there, either.

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

Calleigh flew up under Ash and wrapped both paws around his throat. Ash grabbed her wrists and the two began to struggle against one another in midair. Calleigh tightened her grip on the fox, cutting off his airway more completely. As she was so close to him, Ash decided to test a theory that sprung into his head. Two thin beams of blue energy shot forth from his eyes and began boring into Calleigh's chest. She cried out, but did not loosen her grip. The concentrated beams penetrated her entire body. Calleigh let go of Ash and began tumbling away from him. Was that it? Could it really be that easy? Calleigh righted herself and flew back towards Ash. *No.* Ash ducked and flew underneath her. She twisted and continued to follow him.

“Have you come across Jess and Vic, yet?”

“Well, let's put it this way. If you were expecting them home for dinner, you're better off eating without them.”

“Figured as much.”

“Guess it looks like you'll be dining alone tonight, huh?”

*Ash, must you really taunt her?*

“So, answer me one question, fox.”

“Shoot.” Ash veered right at the next intersection and began to fly lower.

“I assume that since they're dead you figured out how to kill us and how they died before. Am I correct?”

“Give the girl a medal”

*Sarcasm may not be the best tool, right now.*

“Thank you, Un.” Ash muttered to the angel talking in his head. “Keep going! You're doing a bang up job, girl!”

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

“My question is this. How do you intend on killing me?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?”

*Yes, wouldn’t we all.*

“Not helping.”

Ash suddenly rolled over and turned down into a nosedive. Calleigh veered towards the ground and followed Ash to street level. Ash righted himself and began weaving in and out of the cars packed together on the busy avenue. The undead Calleigh did not seem as brave, as she was soaring above the traffic. Ash began to wonder if that could mean something. Ash continued swerving between cars. *The furs of Clawson seem not to give too much of a damn about other furs flying past their cars. Unassisted.* Ash dropped back and turned upwards to grabbed Calleigh’s ankle. Ash twisted around and flung Calleigh into oncoming traffic. The flailing wolfgirl collided with the front of a grey SUV, with a red flashing light on the dashboard. The SUV stopped dead at the collision. Other cars began to stop.

The forward doors opened and two furs climbed from the vehicle, rubbing their heads. Ash could see the occupants in the wash of the many headlights. Daniel Browning and Penelope Honeywell. The two law enforcement officers pulled their weapons and advanced to the front of the car. Ash touched down and began running towards the two of them. Danny and Penny stepped where they could see the damage. The entire front end of the SUV seemed to have impacted in on itself. There was somefurs crumpled up next to the wreck. Calleigh began to move. She let out a low moan of pain. Danny stooped to check on her.

“No! Stay away from her!”

Danny stood up and looked around. He caught sight of Ash running towards them.  
“Ash?”

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

“Get out of there!”

Penny glanced back at Calleigh then jumped and knocked Danny to the ground. A pulse of lavender energy flew from Calleigh’s outstretched palm. Ash fired his own burst and the two glowing spheres collided. The injured wolf stood up, her injuries fading as she did. The two canids leapt for each other, paws outstretched. Ash’s paws wrapped around Calleigh’s throat. Calleigh’s paws remained open with the fingers outstretched. Her claws extended to a length of seven inches. The claws stabbed into Ash’s chest, tearing into his lungs and heart. They hit the ground and rolled for a few feet. Calleigh pulled her claws out and grabbed Ash by his shirt. She lifted him and threw him against the trailer of a parked semi-truck. Ash’s wounds did not seem to be healing. She sliced her claws into his chest again. Blood seeped from around the tips of her fingers.

“How does that feel, you bastard?”

“Feels... great. Bitch.”

Calleigh growled deep in her throat then opened her jaws and sank her teeth into the flesh of Ash’s shoulder. Ash cried out in pain. His eyes began to glow bright blue. The orange and cream colored hairs on his head and face also began to emit a blue haze. The blue haze expanded to cover Ash’s entire body. Calleigh began to pull away, but Ash grabbed her arms and would not let go. The blue haze suddenly became a intense white flare that expanded out in all directions. A bone-chilling scream was heard just before it was silenced. The flare disappeared and only Ash remained. Blood continued to flow from his wounds and stain his shirt. Penny and Danny ran to him and caught him as he fell. Danny lowered Ash gently to the street, while Penny bent over him to look at his face.

“Ash? What the hell was that?”

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

“The only... way to stop... her. Had to make... sure there was... nothing... to regenerate...”

Ash’s words trailed off as he slipped into unconsciousness. Dan was already on his phone calling for an ambulance. Penny kept checking to see if Ash still had a pulse. He did, miraculously. Penny and Danny exchanged looks that said Ash should be dead. But he was not dead. Not yet. The ambulance arrived and Ash was taken to Community-General Hospital. Ash was rushed to the ER for surgery. Penny and Danny stood in the hallway to wait. A young, slender chipmunk with large brown eyes smiled at them before stepping into the operating room. The chipmunk walked around the surgeons to stand at Ash’s head. His eyes were open, but just barely. The chipmunk reached up with one tiny paw and touched Ash on the top of his head. His eyes slowly shut and all went black.

‡ ‡ ‡

*ASH* closed his eyes. When he again opened them, he was staring at a blue sky filled with clouds. A cool breeze flowed over him and blew away all of his pains. Ash closed his eyes again and smiled. The smile disappeared as he realized something. *This can’t be right. I was in a hospital. I’m sure of it. Oh, God...*

“I’m dead.”

“Not quite.”

The voice that spoke was somewhat familiar and behind him. Ash rose and spun around. There, standing before him, was another fox. This fox had two large wing, nine tails and golden fur. His eyes were the same blue as Ash’s.

“Un?”

“That is correct.”

“Where are we?”

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

“It is a place to which most angels never wish to be called. It is a place of judgment. Of retribution. Of death.”

“Way to boost my confidence there, Un. Thanks.”

“I am sorry. I did not mean to alarm you.”

“It’s all right.”

Un folded his arms across his bare chest. It was the first time Ash had noticed that neither of them was dressed. *Well, now I just feel so much more uncomfortable than I did a second ago.* Ash turned away from Un and started pacing around on top of the hillock they stood on. There was a single tree standing in the center of the hillock. The tree was large; its branches were long and covered in leaves. The branches and leaves moved and swayed in the gentle breeze that continued to flow. Ash walked to the tree and sat down. He leaned back against the tree and watched Un. Un seemed to be shivering. He had squatted down on the ground and folded his wings in close around him. Ash was a little perplexed by this behavior.

“Are you okay?”

“No.” The word came through chattering teeth. “I feel like my fur is going to freeze and fall off.”

“What are you talking about? It’s like seventy-five degrees out here.”

Un looked at Ash with confusion in his eyes. “How does the world look to you?”

“What?”

“When you look around, what do you see?”

“Well, we’re on top of a hill. There’s green grass and a large tree with all of its leaves.”

“And, the sky?”

“It’s blue and there’s a few clouds. Why are you asking me these questions, Un?”



*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

The golden furred angel turned his eyes to the ground. “What I see is not what you see.”

Ash furrowed his brow. “Huh?”

“We are on a hill, but there is no grass. And the tree you say is flourishing has long since died. The sky is grey and the clouds black. And the wind would freeze the blood in your veins.”

Ash looked around the wide open space. Ash began to wonder why he and Un were seeing two different worlds when they were sitting so close to each other.

“Because mortal spirits rarely set paw in this world of angelic judgment.”

The voice came from behind. Ash swung around and looked. Before him stood a beautiful female chipmunk in flowing white gowns. The chipmunk smiled back at Ash with large, caring brown eyes. Ash began to stand as the chipmunk started towards him. However, she walked past him and moved to where Un sat huddled on the ground. She bent down and put her arms around his quivering shoulders. She whispered something into Un’s ear that made him begin to cry. Ash stood up and walked closer to the two furs. He stopped when he was close enough to hear their conversation.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” The apologies came between sobs.

“It’s all right, Un. Your father had gotten out of control and had to be dealt with. If you had not taken care of it, they would have sent some other angel to do the job. And, you could not have know about your brother.”

Ash walked closer. “I don’t mean to stick my nose into this, but I was in control when Kordak and his father was killed. I don’t think Un should be punished because I used the abilities he granted me to destroy the bastards that murdered my furiends.”

“Ash, calm down. Un is not in trouble.”

“He’s not?”

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

“I’m not?”

“No, you’re not, my son.”

“Son?”

“Ash, this is my mother. Sophiel.”

“But, aren’t you the nurse from the hospital?”

“Yes, I am. I am also your guardian angel. I’m the guardian for the entire Reynolds family, and, by extension, the Sommers and Archer families.”

“Oh.”

“But, mother? If I am not in trouble, then why are we here? And, why is Ash here?”

“They wanted to speak with him. They have a task that he must undertake.”

Ash spoke up again. “Okay, who is ‘they’?”

“You will meet them shortly. They are waiting for you by the River.”

“And, where, pray tell, is that?”

Sophiel responded by turning and pointing past Ash’s head. Ash turned and saw a large white staircase leading up into the clouds. The staircase stood where the tree had been a few moments ago. Ash stared at the flight of stairs in disbelief. An odd thought popped into Ash’s head as he moved closer to the bottom step.

“Does this go where I think it goes?”

“Yes. That staircase will lead you to the gates of Heaven.”

“Why was I afraid that you’d say that?”

“As you go up the stairs, you will come to a door on your right. Enter that door and you will find them waiting for you.”

“There you go again. Who is this ‘them’ you keep referring to?”

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

“You will find out shortly. Now go. Leave me with my son.”

“Sure.”

Ash nodded his head then started up the stairs.

‡ ‡ ‡

*ASH* continued up the staircase for what felt like hours, before he reached a landing with two doors. Ash remembered Sophiel’s instructions and entered the door on his right. Inside the room, he found only a long and winding river. The river was actually not filled with water. A strange luminescent white substance flowed through the river. Ash dropped to his knees and looked in the river. He watched as images of furs and humans began to swirl into view and then vanish from sight. He saw Calleigh sitting huddle on her bed with the sheets pulled close around her. He watched her for a few moments and realized that she was crying. Ash could not tell what was wrong or hear anything she said. A tear appeared in his eye and ran down his cheek.

“I miss you so much.”

Ash reached out a paw to touch the rippling image of his greatest love, but the liquid swirled and she disappeared. Ash sat back and began to cry. He had tried not to think about his Calleigh in the past week, but now all of his loneliness flooded back into him. The tears streamed from his eyes. As he cried, a light sheet of white fabric was placed across his back. A pair of arms wrapped around his shoulders and held tightly. Ash did not fight against the embrace. A soft voice began whispering in his ear. The voice told him that all would be made right and that he would be reunited with Calleigh. At the mention of Calleigh’s name, Ash looked up at the fur holding him.

She was a slender ocelot about the same height as Ash. Her golden fur was covered in black stripes and spots. Her eyes gave off a light green glow that seemed to soothe Ash as he

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

stared into them. His eyes shifted to two medium-sized wings on her back. The wings were not actually attached to her back. They seemed more to float behind her. The feathers of the wings were also golden and had black spots and stripes. As Ash watched her, another figure walked out of the shadows behind the ocelot. Once in the light, Ash could tell that the new fur was an imposing stallion with golden brown fur and bright yellow eyes. The six wings floating behind his back had the same golden brown hue as his fur. The stallion began pacing in a circle around Ash, all the time, scrutinizing the fox with his glowing eyes.

Next, there came a large silver backed gorilla. The ape walked forward and stopped just outside the circle the stallion was traversing. His four wings were filled with silver feathers and, like the other two, were not connected to his back. The sound of hooves clopping against stone drew Ash's attention to another fur coming up behind him. This fur was a broad-shouldered ram with a fleece of gold. In contrast to the others, his eyes were dark and did not give off a glow. His four golden-feathered wings opened and closed, as if in some outward sign that the fur's mind was working furiously. A very muscular bull appeared beside the ram. The bull had only one horn and three wings. His fur and feathers were a deep almost blood red color. His two eyes, both spheres of roiling red flames, seemed to be focused on Ash's heart.

A small, but well built tiger stepped forward into the light given off by the river. The tiger was a little shorter than Ash and his fur was the same deep shade of orange. The orange fur was overlaid with black stripes, which upon closer inspection are found to be magical incantations written in a long forgotten tongue. The feline had two wings with the same orange and black color scheme. Ash noticed that his wings seemed as if they were too small for a fur of his apparent physical strength. The tiger smiled at Ash with eyes of heavenly white light. Ash looked around at the winged furs now surrounding him. The golden brown stallion continued to

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~*THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES*~

pace around in a circle. The gorilla had moved to the riverbank and was peering into the translucent white fluid. The sound of heavy pawfalls made Ash look around for a seventh angel.

Out of the darkness, there came a fur that seemed at once grander than the others and more humble than they were. This fur was a tall canine with tall ears and a short, thin muzzle. He was a fennec. His tail was long and seemed to flow with the wind currents. The fennec had six large wings that stretched outward in all directions. His golden fur gave off a warm light that added more illumination to the room. As he neared, Ash could make out what he wore. He wore the same flowing white robes as the rest. A low neckline and no sleeves. He, however, wore a pair of silver bracers on his arms and plates of opulently decorated armor on his shoulders. The fennec walked until he was mere feet from Ash then stopped. Ash looked up into the fennec's eyes. They appeared as two glowing blue orbs.

“Ash.” His voiced echoed through the entire room. “I am Michael.”

“Hello. Who're your furiends?”

Michael introduced the other furs. The stallion was named Gabriel. The ram was Raphael. Selaphiel was the name given to the purple-eyed gorilla that was staring into the river. Samael was the tall, battle-scarred bull. The winged tiger was called Barachiel. And, the ocelot, she went by the name Uriel.

“We are the Archangels. The Seven.”

“Archangels.”

“Yes.”

“Well, if you're the Archangels, then what is that?” Ash indicated the river with a jerk of his thumb.

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

“That is the River. It is the ever changing flow of events that constitutes the entire history of the universe.”

“Where does it go?”

“I do not know. It has no end. Not yet.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, the River will not find its end until the universe finds its own. Any other questions before we begin?”

“Just one.”

Michael nodded for Ash to continue.

“Just now, I looked into the River and saw Calleigh. She was crying. When was that?”

Michael looked back at Selaphiel. The gorilla bent over the River and peered into the fluid. The gorilla rose and spoke. His voice was deep and calm.

“The event you ask about happened no less than three of your days ago.”

“What happened?”

Michael placed a paw on Ash’s shoulder. “Some things you must discover for yourself. Now, come walk with me. We must discuss your task.”

Michael turned Ash away from the others and they walked together beside the River. The fennec did not say anything for a while. Ash glanced behind and saw that the other six Archangels were following them. They walked a good distance behind with Uriel in the lead. Michael cleared his throat and Ash looked back at the fennec.

“Your friends are not dead.”

“What!?”

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

“Peace. As I’m sure Dr. Hunter told you, it was only the souls of you and your furiends that were brought across the dimensional divide. Am I correct?”

“Yes.”

“The soul is part of the being. The body is another part of that same being. The body can live without the soul, but the soul cannot live without the body. When your furiends were killed in this world, they did not truly die.”

“I don’t think I follow.”

“Your soul is still intrinsically linked to your original body. If this body is destroyed, your soul would continue on as a disembodied spirit.”

“And, what happens to the soul that does belong to this body?”

“It would die. The being would cease to exist in any form. But, since your furiends’ souls were not damaged, they still live. Their own bodies remain intact in your home world, but are in a catatonic state. They will remain so unless the souls are returned to their original bodies. This is your task. You are to seek out these three souls and return them to their bodies.”

“But, I don’t even know how to travel between dimensions, let alone find three souls. How am I suppose to find a soul?”

“When you awake, you will have the knowledge and power to locate, retrieve and return the souls. You will have companions on this journey. One of them will be able to traverse the dimensional divide. She will be your guide. She, however, has no combat experience, so another fur was found to provide aid if a fight were to breakout.” Michael paused. “Do you understand what I have asked of you?”

“Let me get this straight. My furiends’ souls are out there somewhere and you want me to join with two strangers and go find them and then return them to their original bodies?”

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

“Yes.”

“Got it. What’ll happen to Un?”

Michael did not answer immediately. He closed his eyes to think. “He will remain with you, but he will not be able to give you any advice. You can only tap his powers.”

“Why can’t he give me advice?”

“It is our wish. This task is for you to accomplish alone, without too much heavenly assistance.”

Ash turned his eyes towards the floor. Ash did not like the answer, but did not argue the point either. When Ash looked up, Michael had stopped in front of a glowing white door. Ash looked up at the large fennec. The Archangel waved a paw and motioned for Ash to step into the door. Ash nodded his head then took a step towards the door. At the door, the fox stopped and turned around. The seven Archangels were standing together watching him. The ocelot, Uriel, gave him a warm smile and bowed her head. Ash returned the smile then bowed deeply to the seven high-angels. The fox straightened and walked through the door. The light of the door was bright to the point that Ash had to close his eyes.

‡ ‡ ‡

*ASH* opened his eyes. Above him were the fluorescent lights of a hospital room. Though his chest and shoulder ached, Ash managed to pull himself into a sitting position to look around the room. A beautiful chipmunk sat in a chair beside the bed with her eyes closed. *Sophiel*. Ash continued looking around the room and saw a stack of clothes sitting in a chair and a pair of shoes sitting on the floor. When Ash looked back around, *Sophiel*’s eyes were open and she was smiling at him.

“Did you have a nice rest?”



*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

“How long was I out?”

“Two hours.”

Ash merely shook his head. He looked down and saw the bandages wrapped around his upper body. He looked back to the chipmunk. She was still smiling at him. He smiled back at her.

“Okay, the silence is getting to me.”

“Is there anything you would like to talk about?”

“Yeah, there is. Why was I able to remember everything about this life and Cassie and the others couldn’t?”

“I gave you access to the memories. As your guardian angel, it is my job to aid you.”

Sophiel fell silent. Ash waited to see if she would elaborate, but then decided to go to his next question.

“Why did the disease come back? Did Kordak do that?”

“No, he did not. When the Ash of this world joined Kordak’s cult, Kordak stopped the disease’s progression. When the two souls were switched, the disease returned because Kordak had essentially put a special marker in the soul to protect it from the disease. Your soul does not have that marker, nor is your soul complete.”

“What do you mean?”

“The earring you gave Calleigh. It contained, and still does, a small part of your soul. Anything else?”

“Kordak said he gave me the disease as part of an experiment. Do you know if he was telling the truth?”

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

“He was. This world’s variation of Kordak was conducting an experiment to see if a disease placed in the soul would result in any outward physical debilitation. It seems that it would.”

“Is she like you?” The question flew from his lips before he could stop himself.

“Who?”

“There’s a chipmunk at Furrtown Medical where I come from. She looks just like you. I was wondering if she was anything like you.”

“She is me. As an angel gets more powerful, they can merge with the versions of themselves from the other dimensions we preside over. I have done that. This means, unfortunately, that at this time there is no angel in your home dimension to watch over your family. I am sorry.”

“It’s alright. My family’s strong. They’ll be fine.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“One other thing.”

“Yes?”

“Why was I able to kill Dûrfëa, but not Kordak? Every wound I gave Kordak healed, but Dûrfëa kept bleeding.”

Sophiel was silent for a moment then spoke. “Kordak was inhabiting a mortal body, which was what you were harming as you attacked him. Dûrfëa, on the other paw, had simply taken a corporeal form, which could still be damaged by Angel Fire. Much like when this dimension’s Un and Kordak came to the furs’ rescue during the Mystic Wars. And, as I have.”

Sophiel looked away from Ash for the first time and turned her eyes towards the door. The door opened and two furs walked into the room. The first fur to enter was a young lioness,

*ASHEN SKIES*  
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

not more than twelve years old. Her shoulder length brown hair contrasted nicely with her golden fur. Her piercing blues stared back at Ash. She gave him a large smile then walked to stand beside Sophiel. The fur was a tall, slender female leopard. Her long brown hair fell over her shoulders. She had green eyes that Ash found familiar. She was the leopard from the photograph in Jake's house. She was his mother. Sophiel began speaking.

“Ash, these are your companions. This is Caitlin Hunter. She will help you travel between dimensions. And, this is Sarah O'Connell. She will aid you in fighting, when necessary. And, you will need these. You will use these to contain the souls for transport.”

Sophiel took a box from a bag sitting on the floor and set it on Ash's lap. Ash opened the box and peered inside. In the box were the three athames that had been used to bond Ash to Un. The silver metal blades, though, seemed to have become blades of colored crystals. White, green and purple. Ash lifted the purple crystal knife to look at it. The blade began to glow brightly.

“So, when do we begin?” Sarah's voice was calm.

“As soon as you ladies give me the chance to get dressed.”

The females left the room. Ash slid out of the bed and placed the knives on the table. He pulled on the clothes in the chair then walked back to the knives. He lifted the purple knife again and looked into the blade. The image of Cassie's face appeared in the blade then quickly disappeared. Ash replaced the knife and closed the box.

“It won't be long now.”

~END STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN~