

ASHEN SKIES
~THE SOUL SEARCHER CHRONICLES~

~Shambala~

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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.

ASH paced across the living room of the house belonging to the mortal identity of the angel Sophiel. Sophiel herself sat on the couch. Her brown eyes followed Ash as he moved back and forth. They had been discussing the task that the Seven had given him. The archangel Michael had failed to explain how the powers he was granted work, though. Ash pulled up his sleeve and looked at his right arm. In the right light, areas of discoloration could be discerned from the coat of black and deep orange fur. Markings had been placed on the back of his arm, which were somehow connected to his mission. The markings took the form of ancient runes and magical symbols that would allow Ash to extract and replace souls. The letters and symbols ran along his arm and traced along the bones inside. The symbol of Un was set directly over the joint in his wrist. Ash rolled down his sleeve and turned to Sophiel.

“What will happen to the bodies their souls are in? After I remove the souls, I mean.”

“Who can say what will happen? I can’t. I see no reason to think that the Seven have not prepared for that eventuality. Trust that everything will be fine.”

“I can trust that it will until I die, but that doesn’t guarantee that something won’t go wrong.”

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“Are you always this pessimistic?”

“Only when somefur could end up dead.”

“Which is how often?”

“Quite frequently, actually.”

Sophiel smiled at the comment. Ash did not see the smile as he had turned away from the chipmunk to look out the window. He had spent another year in this world away from Calleigh and his family. His birthday was only a week away. March 25. Ash let his mind wander. He had not celebrated his own birthday in two years and had no desire to do so until he was home again with his furiends and family. He thought about Calleigh. How he longed to see her again. He was finding it harder and harder to remember the feel of her fur as he ran his paw over her body. The smell of her hair, which had seemed to continually tickle his nose even when she was far from him, had deserted him. All he could see now were Calleigh’s bright green eyes, smiling at him.

“Ash?”

Sophiel walked up behind Ash and touched him on the shoulder. Ash started. He looked around at the chipmunk. Smiling, she reached up and wiped away a lone tear that had fallen down Ash’s cheek. Ash looked away from the angel and stared out the window. A car pulled into the driveway. The doors opened and Sarah O’Connell and Caitlin Hunter stepped from the car. Each of them carried plastic bags in each paw. The two felines had gone into town to shop for supplies. They would be making their first journey in just a few hours. Sophiel would go with them to lead them to what would essentially be their jumping off point for their travels. Ash knew that when his mission was over his furiends would be safe and he would be home. Knowing this, Ash should have been the happiest fur alive, but he was still frightened.

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Frightened by the fact that he could very well be leaving three comatose bodies behind him by the time he was home.

The front door opened and Caitlin walked in followed by Sarah. The two felines walked through the entrance hall and into the kitchen to put the bags down. Sarah walked back out to the car and grabbed a few more items from the backseat before shutting the door and coming back to the house. As her arms were full, Sarah pushed the door closed with the sole of her shoe. Ash moved to the leopardess and took some of the parcels from her and set them on the coffee table. One of the packages had a slightly cylindrical shape to it that Ash immediately recognized. Sarah sat down on the couch and tore back the brown paper concealing the thirty arrows she had purchased. Ash began to wonder what was in the other boxes. Sarah pulled one of the larger boxes around and opened it revealing the folding compound bow inside. The leopardess unfolded the bow and pulled back the string.

“Oh, dear.” Sophiel’s soft voice broke the silence.

“What’s wrong?” Ash started towards her.

“Well, it’s just that I had managed to acquire something that I was going to give to Sarah before you set off.”

“What was it?”

Sarah rose from the couch and laid the compound bow on the table. Sophiel excused herself and left the room for a few minutes. Ash and Sarah exchanged confused glances during the chipmunk’s absence. Caitlin walked into the room, a glass of milk in her paw and a cookie sticking out from between her teeth. Sophiel returned carrying a wooden case about five feet long and one foot wide. She walked to Sarah and opened the case for her to look in. Inside the box was a long wooden recurve bow with a padded grip and strips of gold inlaid into the wood.

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Sarah covered her mouth with her paw and fell into one of the chairs. Ash looked from Sarah to the bow. He stared at the curved piece of wood for a moment before he recognized the bow. It was the same bow Jake had taken from his closet. The same bow the police had taken as evidence when then processed Kordak's gathering chamber as a crime scene.

"It's all right." Ash dropped to his knees in front of Sarah, as he spoke. "If you want to cry, go ahead. We won't think any less of you if you did."

Tears began to run from the leopard's eyes. Ash took Sarah's other paw in his and held it tightly. Sophiel closed the case and sat it on the table. She crossed to the window and stared out towards the houses across the street without actually seeing them. Sarah cried silently for a few minutes before stopping and pulling herself together. Sarah smiled at Ash then reached for the box containing the bow. Ash stood and moved out of her way. Opening the case, Sarah gingerly removed the bow and held it in her paws. Caitlin took a step closer.

"What is it?"

"It was once my bow. But, I gave it to my son when I left. Ash?"

"What?" Ash lowered himself to look her in the eye.

"I want you to take it."

"What? No, I couldn't."

"After all you've done and are going to do, Jake would want you to have it. Please?"

"All right, if you insist."

"I do."

"I'm sorry about this." Sophiel's voice drifted to them from her place at the window. "I really am. I hadn't thought that it would upset you so. Can you forgive me?"

"Of course. It was just unexpected, is all."

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Ash looked away from the leopardess and the chipmunk and set his eyes on the wooden recurve bow balancing on the edge of the table. The last time he had seen the bow, it was lying next to Jake's blood-covered body. The image of the leopard's mangled corpse lying next to the slain form of his greatest love flashed through the fox's mind. Ash remembered the lifeless stare of Cole's still opened eyes. The memory of their bloodstained corpses made the fur on the back of Ash's neck stand on end. Ash thought about Cassie. About how long she suffered and how she died alone in a sterile hospital room. He thought of all of the pain they must have been in, not only from being physically wounded, but having to watch their own friends and family attack them and enjoying it. That must have been terrible for them. Possibly even more so than when Ash had to hunt them down and destroy them. A strange feeling began to well up in the pit of Ash's stomach. Ash thought at first that it was hatred at himself for letting his only friends in this world die. But, he soon realized it was something else. Something else entirely.

It was a feeling of being alone, it was a feeling of loss, it was sadness and it was fear. The feeling in his stomach was all of these, and yet something about the feeling still seemed a little off. The feeling seemed to be coming from a distant place. A place far enough away that he could not see or touch it, but still somehow close by. Ash knew it sounded strange, but that was what it felt like. But this too was not what had Ash concerned about the feeling he was getting. What really made the fur on his neck tingle was that the feelings of fear and dread were not his own. *That would explain the distant feeling, but why the closeness at the same time?* Ash sat on the couch and tried to concentrate on the feeling. He hoped he might be able to pinpoint its location and find out whose feelings these were. He closed his eyes and tried to quiet his mind. He pushed everything away from him except for the distant feelings.

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The room around him seemed to melt away, Sarah and Sophiel's voices faded and vanished along with every other sound in the room. The room disappeared first and was replaced by an infinite blackness. Ash felt himself moving through the blackness at an incredible speed. As Ash looked about him he started to notice the darkened outlines of tall, city buildings. The blind flight came to a stop before the silhouetted shape of a squat, plain-looking building. Ash suddenly felt himself being pulled to the side by an invisible arm. The tall silhouettes streaked past Ash and vanished. The sound of rustling leaves drifted up from below Ash. He looked, but saw no indication of there being trees below. He looked up and the shadow of a village rose up ahead of the speeding fox. The village itself appeared to be well fortified, with a high wall around its perimeter. There was something standing in the center of a large square, but Ash did not have a chance to see what it was properly before being jerked upwards. Ash found himself floating in front of what could have been the blackened façade of a brownstone that could have been on the other side of town from the tall buildings from before.

The black shape of the brownstone melted back into the all-consuming void. The blackness suddenly lifted and Ash was back in Sophiel's living room. When the room came back to him, Sarah was the only other fur present in the room. Ash looked around for the other two, but saw no sign of them.

“They went to the kitchen.”

Sarah's voice startled him. “What?”

“Sophiel and Caitlin. They're in the kitchen.”

Ash nodded and rose from the couch. He crossed the room and stood in front of the window, looking out at the quiet neighborhood. The fox sighed and leaned on the windowsill.

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Sarah stood up and lifted her son's bow from the edge of the coffee table. She walked to Ash and touched him lightly on his shoulder. He looked around.

Sarah hefted the bow. "You ever use one of these things before?"

"No, can't say that I have. That was always Jake's area of expertise."

Sarah motioned for the fox to follow her. Ash accompanied the leopardess out of the living room and into the backyard. Sarah stopped and held the bow out for Ash to take. The fox wrapped his left paw around the leather-bound grip. Sarah began telling him what to do and how to hold the bow. Ash stretched his left arm out beside him and turned his head to look down his arm. Sarah walked around Ash, looking him up and down. It was a strange feeling to her, but she could swear she saw part of her son in this fox standing before her. She shook the feeling and went back to scrutinizing the vulpine warrior. For a fur with no experience handling a bow, Ash had excellent form. His arm was perfectly straight and his grip on the bow was unbreakable. Sarah walked back around and stood in front of Ash.

"How does it feel?"

"Strange."

"Strange? How so?"

"Like I have done this before, but I know I haven't. This is the first time I've ever picked up a bow, and yet it feels like I've been doin' this all my life."

"That is strange. Let's try shooting it. Be right back."

"Wait. I've always wanted to try this."

Sarah stopped and looked at the fox. Ash flexed the fingers of his right paw, raising it as he did so. Sarah continued to watch as blue energy flared from Ash's palm and enveloped his paw. Ash concentrated on the energy flowing around and through his paw. The energy flashed

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brighter and swirled to form a lengthening column extending from his palm. The column reached a length of about thirty inches and flashed again then resolved into an arrow with a golden shaft and black fletchings. The tip of the arrow had a glossy silver finish to it and gave off a faint blue glow.

“Wow. It worked.”

“That was pretty impressive.”

“Thanks.”

Sarah walked over and took the arrow from Ash and began examining it. Ash’s brow furrowed with a question, but did not ask it. The leopardess turned the arrow over and over again in her paws. She held the arrow lightly in her paws and held it up to look down the shaft. Ash noticed that her lips were moving and then he caught the sound of her voice speaking in hushed tones. *Now, she’s talking to herself.* Ash smirked to himself and looked away from her. Ash wondered if Jake had had to go through this kind of inspection when first learning how to use a bow. Ash looked back and saw Sarah flexing the arrow back and forth. Ash could not hold his questions in any longer.

“What are you doing?”

Sarah replied without looking at Ash. “Checking your spine.”

Ash’s ears sank low on the sides of his head in confusion. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t aware there was anything wrong with my spine. Did it fall out, or something?”

“No, silly, I mean the arrow’s spine.”

“Perhaps you’d better explain.”

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“Yes, I think I better had. Spine is the term used to describe the stiffness of the shaft. Since the arrow has to deflect around the bow, having the correct spine will allow the arrow to pretty much curve around the handle and hit the target instead of flying off too far to either side.”

“Ah. Thank you. Clear as mud, but thank you.”

“Just shut up and nock the arrow.”

Ash took the arrow from her and, with it rested on the top of his paw, slipped the notched end around the bowstring and pulled the back. He pulled back until the bow seemed like it would snap. “Like this?”

“Yes. Now shoot.”

Ash nodded then raised the bow again to eye-level and looked down his arm. His eyes focused on a knot in one of the wood boards in the fence. Ash took a deep breath to clear his head. Three of his fingers were wrapped around the string of the bow. His index finger was above the arrow’s nock and the other two below. With a twang, Ash released the arrow. The thirty-inch missile deflected around the bow, just as Sarah said it would. The speeding arrow covered the short twenty-foot distance to the far fence post and pierced the wood. The arrow wobbled for a moment before steadying out. Ash stood and stared at the arrow. It was jutting out from the direct center of the knot Ash had focused on. The fox raised his eyebrows in surprise and looked back at Sarah. She was standing very still, her surprise betrayed only by how her mouth was hanging open. Ash looked at the bow in his paw then back at the arrow. He let how a short *hmp*.

“That was unexpected.”

“Very.”

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The sound of ceramic shattering and then a shrill scream came from inside the house. Sarah and Ash turned and bolted for the door. Sarah was inside first. She ran into the kitchen and saw Caitlin standing against the counter like she was trying to escape some terrible fate. Sophiel was crumpled on the floor on her knees. She had one paw on the floor to steady herself while the other was clutched over her heart. A pair of brown-feathered wings had appeared on her back. They were drooping low, the tips of the feathers dragging the floor. Sarah walked closer, stepping over the fragmented platter, and bent low to see what was wrong. Sophiel breathed a single word.

“Ash.”

Sarah swung her head around. Ash was standing in the doorway, the recurve bow in his left paw and a very ceremonial looking knife with a blazing blue blade clutched in his right. Ash moved closer. He set the bow down on the counter as he past. The fox stooped and held out his right paw, the knife vanishing as his fingers opened. Sophiel took his paw and Ash pulled her to her hindpaws. Ash started to lead her to a chair to sit her down, when her left paw moved from where it was clutched over her heart and seized Ash’s shirt. Ash looked at her paw then back into her eyes. Her soft, brown eyes were full of fear.

“You have to leave now.”

“What? Why?”

“There is another.”

Sarah stood up. “Another who?”

“Another fur, or worse, that knows about your furiends’ souls. He has already begun searching for them. You must gather your stuff and leave this moment.”

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Ash nodded. He helped her into a chair then left the kitchen. When he returned, he had his jacket on and was carrying Caitlin and Sarah's coats. He also brought Sarah's compound bow and her quiver filled with the arrows she had bought. Sarah took the quiver and hooked it to her belt so that it hung down by her right side. Taking the bow next, she folded the two limbs back and hung the bow on the opposite side by the riser. She took her coat and put it on. The hem of the coat was low enough to hide the quiver and the bow. Sophiel took Caitlin aside and spoke to her softly, so only the young lioness could hear.

"I am going to send the three of you straight to your destination because time is of the essence."

"But..."

"You will get your chance to prove yourself, yet, my dear." Sophiel paused as she regarded the lioness. "Caitlin?"

"What?"

"On this journey, you will see things that would frighten even the bravest of warriors and you will hear things that will bring you pain and make you feel hatred. But..."

"What?"

"But, I don't want you to hold anything in. Whatever you see, or hear, I want you to talk about it. Talk to Ash and Sarah, but mainly Ash. He alone of the two will understand your pain better. Promise me this."

Caitlin looked away from the chipmunk and glanced at Ash. The tall fox was standing beside Sarah. He had his coat on and the wooden bow slung over his shoulders. He was pulling on a pair of black leather gloves. Caitlin noticed that he looked very sad. In fact, Ash had not

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seemed terribly happy about much of anything in the past year. He had always been very reserved and solemn. Caitlin looked back at Sophiel.

“All right. I promise.”

“Good girl.” Sophiel stood up and called Ash and Sarah over. “I’m going to send you all away now. Goodbye and good luck.”

‡ ‡ ‡

FURS and humans mingled about on the streets. Ash looked around at the mass of creatures walking to and fro. He looked and saw taxis moving through the streets or parked on the side of the road, waiting for passengers to give their orders. There was something odd that Ash, Sarah and Caitlin noticed. All of the cabs were being driven by furs. Horses to be more precise. A garbage truck drove past on the other side of the street. There was a goat in the driver’s seat, and another hanging off the back with a pig. All three were dressed in blue coveralls and looked very bored. Ash continued to look around and noticed something very strange about the furs moving through the streets. Most of the furs were either canine or feline, but there were a few furs of other species. Each and every last one of them was walking around behind a family of humans. There was something else that all of these furs had in common. There were all wearing...

“Hey! Watch where you’re goin’ you little...”

The words trailed off and became a low chuckle. Ash stopped and turned. Sarah and Caitlin were further behind him than he had thought. Caitlin seemed to have accidentally bumped into a member of a pack of wandering human males. Ash smelled trouble. There were five of them altogether and they were all dressed in loose fitting clothes of black and white. The six humans started crowding around Caitlin. Two more came up from a nearby alley and moved

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between Sarah and Caitlin. *Barely here ten minutes and there's already trouble.* Ash sighed and began making his way through the crowded sidewalk. It was slow going at first, but Ash began pushing human and furs aside when the two newcomers seized Sarah by the arms and tried pulling her to the side. Ash could hear some of what was being said.

“Forgive my earlier outburst, sweetie.” The man smiled at one of the others. “It was totally my fault and I overreacted. Allow me to make it up to you.”

“Please... no.”

The human the leader had smiled at grabbed Caitlin from behind and held her tightly. The man started to move in closer. Caitlin cried out for help, but all those on the street walked right past like nothing was happening.

“Get your paws of her!” Sarah snarled through gritted teeth. “Son of a bitch!”

Sarah broke free of the two men holding her back and charged at the others. The leopardess did not get the chance to hit him. One of the others alerted the leader to the eminent attack. He turned and swung his right arm; the knuckles of his balled fist catching Sarah across her face. Sarah stumbled backwards into a lamppost; the other two men had her arms again. The leader went to lower his arm, but Ash arrived and took hold of his wrist. The man looked around at the angry expression on the fox's face and his eyes got very wide.

“I believe the young lady asked you to back off.”

“Let go of me you mangy mutt.”

“Mangy mutt? I have never been called that in my life. I'll let it slide, if you let go of her.”

“Listen, pup, free furs, particularly the fems, are fair game on the streets. Mind your own fuckin' business.”

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“That young lion is a friend of mine, which makes this whole thing my business.”

One of the other humans worked up enough nerve to speak. “Fuck off, you bastard. This is our catch. You can have her when we’re through.”

Ash glared at the human. “Okay, now I’m pissed off.”

Ash squeezed the man’s wrist and drove his other paw into the back of his elbow. Him and the rest of the gang hear the sickening crack as Ash destroyed the man’s elbow and bent his arm backwards. The man crumpled to the sidewalk. The three not holding anything moved to surround Ash as their leader crawled away. The human directly in front of him pulled out a long, slim switchblade pocket knife. He depressed the release mechanism and the blade sprung out, the sharp edge reflecting the sunlight a little. He lunged at Ash with this knife. Ash grabbed his wrist and twisted causing the knife to fall from his grip. The knife hit the ground just as a metal pipe struck Ash on the back of his head. The fox stumbled forward and into the man before him. They fell but Ash continued forward and rolled to his hindpaws.

Switchblade began to rise from the ground. The man staggered up right and turned to face Ash, but all he saw was the fox’s black-gloved paw coming towards him. The man stumbled backwards once more and fell over. Lead-pipe came at Ash again and swung for his face. Ash grabbed the pipe before it could connect and drove his knee deep into the man’s gut. The force of the impact drove all of the air from the man’s lungs. Gasping for breath the man dropped to the ground and fell over on his side. Ash glared at the last man that had surrounded him initially. The man pulled out a long knife and brandished it at the fox. Ash stood in place, the lead pipe in his left paw. The man slipped his finger into a ring on the grip and began spinning the knife around in flourishing circles. When the man stopped, he stood there and gave Ash a wry, challenging smile. Ash looked down at the pipe in his paw. It was about two and a

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half feet long. With his own flourishing movements, Ash spun the small piece of lead piping above his head and transferred the pipe to his right paw. The pipe began to glow and lengthen. A sharp point started growing from one end.

“What do you think?” Ash brought the now seven-foot spear down so that the tip pointed directly to the man’s heart. “Still wanna fight me?”

The man dropped his knife and turned to run. “I didn’t sign up for this shit. I’m outta here.”

Ash turned to the men still holding Caitlin and Sarah. He set his eyes on the one with his hands clutch tightly around Caitlin’s arms. Ash raised the spear and aimed it at the man’s throat then raised it to point at the center of his face.

“What do you say to letting them go,” Ash moved the spear to point at the men holding Sarah, “And, getting the hell outta here? Hm? How ‘bout it?”

The three men relinquished their holds on the felines and took off through the crowd. Caitlin ran forward and threw her arms around Ash’s waist. Ash put his left arm around her shoulders. Sarah walked over and touched Ash lightly on the arm. He looked at her. Sarah nodded in the direction of the alley from where the men had come from. Ash turned his head and saw the man who had been leader moving off down the alley. Ash raised the spear, which began shrinking back to its original size and shape. The fox turned and hurled the pipe after the fleeing human. The pipe struck him across his shoulders causing the man to be propelled forward a little faster than he had intended and to fall to the ground, unconscious. Ash took Caitlin’s paw and led them away from the scene of the incident. They walked for a few minutes before Sarah spoke up.

“What did they mean by ‘free’ furs?”

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“Look around. All the furs on the streets are either cats or dogs and they’re all in close proximity to a human family.”

“Yeah. Your point?”

“Look very closely at each of them. What do they all have in common?”

Sarah and Caitlin’s eyes began scanning the crowds of furs meandering after the humans. At first glance, there was nothing any of the furs had in common. Except for a few here and there that were the same breed of dog or cat, there was not one prevailing connection. Caitlin glanced over at a young husky that had come up beside her. The husky had copper fur and was trailing behind an adolescent human girl. The girl kept looking back, as if to make sure the husky was still there. That’s when Caitlin noticed the long leather strap running from the girl’s closed fist and the collar around the husky’s neck. Caitlin stared at the dog and the collar for a few minutes. The golden tag dangling from the leather collar had a name written on it. “*Jude.*” Caitlin’s eyes widened in horror. She looked up at Ash.

“All the furs are slaves?”

“The humans prefer the term ‘pets’ probably, but yeah.”

“Where the hell are we?” Sarah glanced around. “This looks like Furrtown, but somehow I doubt that’s what it’s called.”

Sarah and the others started looking around for anything that might tell them precisely where they were. Ash began casting his eyes about for a newspaper stand or a human who was carrying his copy very loosely and would not likely miss it. As he was looking about, Caitlin tugged on his jacket sleeve. He looked at her and she pointed towards a row of newspaper dispensers. It was their only hope. They moved towards the dispensers. Ash gave Caitlin’s paw a light squeeze and she let go. He walked to the dispenser. *I can’t believe I’m doing this.* Ash

reached out with his right paw holding a coin. The coin gave of an ethereal blue glow before becoming silver. He inserted the coin and opened the door. Ash grabbed the top paper and walked back to where Sarah and Caitlin were standing. Ash held the paper where they could all see.

The Shambala Times

Shambala, Thursday, March 20, 6927

Caitlin looked at Ash. “Shambala? Where’d they come up with that name?”

“A legend. Shambala is supposed to be a kingdom of peace and tranquility somewhere in the Himalayas. Although, from what I’ve seen so far, I’d say they missed the mark a little.”

“Check out the year.” Sarah leaned in. “6927? So, this is the future.”

“For some dimension, yeah.” Ash glanced down the front page. “Look here. It says that the High Prefect is doing his “annual no-appointment necessary audiences” today at the Grand Tower. Maybe he can give us some answers.”

Sarah glanced up from the paper. “High Prefect?”

“Grand Tower?” Caitlin looked around, but her eyes soon rested on an enormous tower in the distance. “You think maybe they mean that one?”

Ash and Sarah looked in the direction Caitlin indicated. They, too, saw the tower rising above the most of the other buildings in the city. The sun glistened brightly off the curving white walls and the darkened windows. Ash’s eyes traveled up the side of the tower. Except for where the windows were recessed into the walls, the ivory façade was perfectly smooth and uniform from top to bottom. Ash folded up the newspaper and took Caitlin’s paw again. The three furs began making their way to the building. As the crowd started to thin out, they began quickening their pace. Soon, they were jogging down the sidewalk towards the tower. They

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stopped just outside the entrance to catch their breath. Ash moved to the door and pulled it open then stepped aside for Sarah and Caitlin to enter. The fox followed them in. The entrance hall was enormous. There were many humans and some furs going back and forth from desks and counters. All of the furs were dressed in pressed suits, but instead of ties, they wore collars.

“There’s a directory over here.”

Caitlin looked around at the humans and furs. “Why don’t we just ask?”

“After that little episode outside, I want to get in and out as quickly as possible. Best way to do that is to storm in and demand answers.”

Sarah eyed the sly fox. “Really? Are you sure? Cause I could’ve sworn the best way would’ve been to ask politely, but with urgency?”

“Yeah, yeah whatever. I just don’t want to get thrown out for lack of a collar, or something else equally as strange. Here we go. High Prefect has his office on the tenth floor. Looks like that’s the only office up there. Let’s go.”

Ash led the two felines towards an elevator at the back of the reception area; Sarah rolled her eyes as they turned from the directory. Caitlin pressed the button to call the cart down. Sarah looked around the large room as they waited. For such an opulent looking tower, the interior seemed to be extraordinarily plain. The desks, counters and the floors were just like the desks, counters and floors one would expect to find in any other office building. Sarah had thought she might find gilded designs in bas-relief on the fronts of the desks. But, no, there was nothing overly extravagant about anything in the lobby, except perhaps some of the tags on the furs’ collars. Elevator car came to a stop and the doors parted. A family of humans, an adult male and female and a female child, followed by a tall golden retriever with a black leather collar and brown eyes. Ash stepped into the elevator and Sarah and Caitlin followed him on. Ash

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pressed the button for the tenth level. The doors closed in front of them and the elevator started its slow ascent to the tenth floor.

“How do you know this High Prefect is gonna be able to help us?” Sarah looked sidelong at Ash and waited.

“I don’t. It’s a childish hope that I haven’t and hope never to grow out of.” Ash looked up at the digital screen counting up the floors. “I figure with a title like ‘High Prefect’ that he’s bound to know something. Right?”

“Well, I guess we’ll find out.”

The elevator came to a slow stop and the doors parted. The three furs stepped forth from the elevator. The elevator emptied into a room quite a bit smaller than the lower reception area. Directly across from the elevator was the entrance to a long hallway leading into another room that held a desk with a human woman sitting behind tapping away at the computer keyboard. A large set of double doors was set into the far wall. Ash motioned to Sarah and Caitlin and the three of them set off down the hallway towards the office doors. The hallway turned out to be a bit longer than it had looked initially. As they neared the end of the hall, Ash got a better look at the receptionist and her long jet-black hair. She looked up and saw the three furs coming down the hallway and began to rise from her chair. Ash saw her but did not slow his pace. He walked straight to the doors and pushed them open. He barged into the office with Caitlin and Sarah close on his heels, the receptionist a little further behind. The office was large with the back wall being a large window that reached from floor to ceiling. There was a single desk in the office and a male human standing in front of the window with his back to the door.

“I’m sorry, sir. I tried to stop them, but...” The receptionist walked up beside Ash.

The man spoke but did not turn. “It’s all right, Ms. Chase. That will be all. Thank you.”

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“Yes sir.”

The man turned back to his desk and pressed a button on the desk. The panes of the window tinted and the glaring light was cut out. The man that stood beside the desk was roughly Ash’s height and had broad shoulders. He wore a pressed, beige suit and had his long dark-brown-almost-black color hair pulled back behind his head. His beard and moustache were cut close to his face and served to give him a more distinguished look. The man walked from around the desk and moved towards Ash. The man extended his hand and Ash took it.

“Good morning. Good morning. Have a seat, please.”

Ash released the man’s hand. “No thank you. We’re in a bit of a hurry.”

“In that case, I am Ashli Reynolds, High Prefect of Shambala. How can I help?”

Ash paused for a moment upon hearing the man’s name, but then he continued. “We’re looking for some friends, but we don’t really know where to start looking.”

“Do you have their names? I can put them in the directory and see if I can’t find them for you.”

Ash glanced around at Sarah and Caitlin then turned back to High Prefect Reynolds. Ash gave him the names of his friends. Cassie Archer. Jake O’Connell. Cole Sommers. Reynolds nodded and went back to his desk and sat down behind his computer. His bright blue eyes on the screen, the man began entering the names into a large database that held the names and addresses of every citizen of Shambala, human and fur. As the man typed and searched, Sarah pulled Ash further from the desk, to insure the privacy of their conversation.

“Ash. Is that who I think it is?”

Caitlin looked at the man then back at the other two. “Who is he?”

“Yeah, I think it is.”

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“Who?”

“Me.” Caitlin cocked her head to one side and gave Ash a very confused stare. “Maybe I should explain. There are multiple dimensions running in parallel to our own, blah, blah, blah. In each of those worlds there is, or at least should be, a version of everyfur we know. Although sometimes that other version isn’t a fur at all.”

Caitlin started speaking hesitantly. “So, you’re saying that that human is this world’s version of you?”

“Exactly. Or at least I think so. There’re definitely some similarities.”

“Ah ha! Found them.”

Reyns’ exclamation startled the three furs. They walked back to the desk and waited.

“All right, let’s look at what we’ve got. There’s one Cassie Archer in the database and— and she works in the lobby. She should be here today.”

Sarah leaned in. “Does it say what species she is?”

“Yes, she’s human. Should I call her up here?”

Ash glanced around the office, pausing for a chance to think. Had she been here, she should have seen them as they came in. Unless, she had been sent out on an errand of some sort. *Or, it is her. But if she’s here, that might mean that it’s not and we’re wasting valuable time.* Ash looked back to Reyns. “Call her up.”

Reyns nodded and leaned over to the intercom. He called out to his receptionist, Ms. Chase, to have her send for Cassie Archer to come to his office. They had to wait only a few minutes before the door opened and a woman walked in the door. Her pace faltered a bit when she caught sight of the three furs, but she kept striding towards the desk. Ash looked at her and had to admit that she was beautiful. *As beautiful as she was the day Micah had brought her*

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home to introduce her. She had long brown hair that fell around her shoulder. Her hazel eyes drifted to Ash but quickly moved back the High Prefect behind the desk.

“You asked to see me, sir.”

“Yes, I did. Do you know these furs?”

Cassie turned her eyes on them, glancing from one to the other. “No, sir. I can’t say that I’ve ever seen any of them before.”

Ash glanced at Sarah and whispered to her. “It’s not her.”

Reyns sat up. “Thank you. That will be all.”

“Of course, sir.” The woman turned and left the office.

“Hm. Well, let’s go on. Let’s see. Jake O’Connell. Oh, Jake O’Connell passed away seven years ago. He was nine.”

“Well, go to the next one. Cole Sommers.”

“Cole Sommers is alive and well. He currently resides in room 323 of the Shambala Psychiatric Hospital. He’s there for observation, has been for the past several months.”

Ash turned to the felines. “That’s got to be him.” He looked back at Reyns. “Why is he in a mental institution?”

“The family became worried about him one day. I spoke with them and they said that Cole woke up once in the middle of the night while home from college. They said that he was rambling on about being killed and about being a wolf. It happens sometimes. No one’s quite sure why, but there are cases where humans think they should be furs.”

“You have to take us to him. We have to see him.”

Reyns agreed and led the three furs to a private elevator that went to a parking garage underneath the tower. The Prefect led them towards a white four-door sedan. The sedan itself

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was floating about a foot above the parking garage floor. He opened the back door for Sarah and Caitlin. Ash declined sitting in the back and walked around to get in the front passenger's seat. Reynolds shrugged and closed the back door then climbed in the driver's seat of the sedan and started the motor. The High Prefect pulled the car out of its parking place and drove towards the exit of the garage. When it was safe, he maneuvered the car out of the garage and merged into traffic. None of the occupants spoke for the first few minutes of the trip, but Caitlin soon broke the silence. She leaned forward and directed her question at the High Prefect.

“Why does such an important official drive his own car? Don't you usually have a driver to take you everywhere you go?”

“I was never really one for all of the formalities. Besides, this way the money that would be spent on paying someone to drive me around can go to other things. Education programs, medical research and that sort of thing.” Reynolds continued to speak as he guided the car through traffic. “Some of that money, in fact, was used to fund the hospital where your friend is. The money helped the doctors build this device that they could look at a patient's dreams with while they slept. Or, something like that. I'm not really sure how it works. Ah, here we are.”

The hospital came into view as Reynolds pulled around the corner. The building itself seemed rather ordinary. It had five stories with windows all across the front and a set of tinted glass doors in the center of the building at ground level. The High Prefect led the way to the doors and pulled one open for the furs to pass. Sarah and Caitlin entered first then Ash and Reynolds followed them in. There was nothing outstanding about the interior of the hospital, either. The linoleum floor was a light beige color and the walls had an off-white hue. There was a single nurse at the desk in the entryway. She had a slender body, short brown hair and piercing blue eyes. Reynolds moved to the desk and began talking to the nurse. The man turned and

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indicated Ash, Sarah and Caitlin. The nurse looked at the group and smiled. The badge pinned to her blouse had the name *Kate* printed across it in black letters. *Kate?* When the woman looked back to Reynolds, Ash looked around at Caitlin. She and the woman had the same eyes. Reynolds walked back to the group.

“The doctor overseeing Mr. Sommers’ case will be done shortly to take us to his room. We’re very lucky to have her. There isn’t another doctor alive that understands the fur mind better.”

“There’s a very good reason for that.”

Reynolds turned around. Behind him stood a beautiful doe in her mid-to-late twenties. She had long dark brown hair that was pulled up in a bun to keep it out of her bright green eyes. She moved to Reynolds and shook his hand then turned to Ash and the others.

“I’m Doctor Penelope Honeywell. I understand you’re here to see Cole.”

Ash nodded. “That’s right.”

“This way.”

Dr. Honeywell turned and led the group down the hall she had come from and towards an elevator. High Prefect Reynolds seemed to praise her the entire way.

“Dr. Honeywell is the only fur in the city, possibly the world, to graduate from medical school. Indeed, she may be the only fur to achieve anything higher than a high school level education. I’m hoping to change that though.”

“Stop it, Ash. You’re gonna make me blush.” Ash’s right ear twitched at the use of the name.

“I’m sorry, Penny. I’ll try to cut back.”

“No, keep going. You’re doing a wonderful job.”

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Sarah cut in. "Tells us about Cole."

"Right." Honeywell cleared her throat. "Mr. Sommers was brought in by his family about six months ago for observation. We'd seem similar case like his before, but nothing this severe."

Ash turned his head to look at her as that exited the elevator. "How so?"

"Most humans with this condition merely think that they are a fur. But, they don't fit behaviorally. Your friend, who thinks he's a wolf, fidgets in a way I've never seen before. He reaches up to scratch behind his ear and is genuinely surprised when he discovers it further down on the side of his head. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was a fur trapped in a human body."

"You have no idea." Ash muttered the comment, but before Honeywell could respond, Caitlin broke in.

"Ash!"

Ash swung around and saw the young lioness holding up one of the crystal bladed knives Sophiel had given them for their mission. The one she held had a white blade that was burning brightly. Ash reached over and took the knife from her and studied the blade. With his brow furrowed, Ash turned and walked down the hall a few more steps. The blade got brighter. Ash looked around at Sarah and Caitlin and opened his mouth to speak. He would not get the chance because at the moment a loud scream was heard coming from around the corner and down the hall.

"NO! ASH!!"

"Cole!"

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Ash turned and took off around the corner with the rest of the group close on his heels. He rounded the corner in time to see a figure shrouded in dark, swirling energy step out of a room at the far end of the hall. The figure carried a knife with a long, silver blade turned mostly red by dripping blood. A pair of glowing red eyes turned towards Ash and flared brightly. The fox rushed at the dark figure, a blue glowing sword appearing in his paw as he moved. Just as Ash reached his target, the darkened figure turned and vanished into thin air. Ash stood rooted in place, his eyes darting around the hall, looking to see if the figure was going to reappear. He turned and looked into the open door of the hospital room. Room 323. Ash stepped in the door and looked around. Ash walked further in and turned to his left. There lying against the wall was a very human Cole. His stomach had been sliced open and blood was running everywhere. Ash took a step back and fell to the bed. He sat there looking at his friend. He looked at the crystalline knife in his paw, the blade glowing brightly. Ash looked up and noticed that Cole's eyes were now looking at him. Cole coughed and turned to look fully at Ash.

“Cole.” Ash slide off the cot, dropping the glowing knife, and moved to sit next to his friend. “Help! I need help in here! Hold on, Cole. Hold on!”

“He looked like...?” The words came out as a strained whisper.

Ash placed his paw over Cole's heart and leaned in closer. “Hold on. Damn it! Stay with me! Help!”

Cole turned his head to look up at Ash. Right before they closed, Ash thought he saw a flicker of something in those green eyes. Sadness? Fear? No. The emotion that flashed through those eyes was nothing more than cold dread. Ash could understand how he felt. He had felt that way many times. He looked away. His eyes caught sight of the knife. The glow around the blade began to subside. It grew dimmer and dimmer until the glow finally vanished. The

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thumping of Cole's heart slowed and ceased; his chest fell one last time as the remaining quantities of air escaped his lungs. Not really knowing what came over him, Ash began pounding on the human's chest. Ash stopped and fell back against the wall. He heard the others come around the corner. Sarah was the first in the door. She saw Ash first, her eyes drifting to his bloodstained paws then to the blood on the legs of his pants.

When she saw the human body, a large gash spreading across his abdomen, Sarah gasped and covered her mouth with her paws. Caitlin was the next in, followed by Dr. Honeywell, High Prefect Reys and two orderlies. Caitlin caught sight of the bloody corpse and screamed. Sarah turned to the lioness and wrapped her arms around her. Ash slowly rose and walked from the room, lifting the knife from the floor. Ash turned down the hall, but only made it to the corner before his legs gave out and he fell to the floor. Trembling, tears began to roll from his eyes.

“Fuck!”

~END SHAMBALA~