

## ~Long Time~

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ASH walked through the dark deserted halls of the high school he had left behind upon graduation eight years ago. He looked around the hall, his mind travelling back to those days when his life had been much simpler. Before Kordak had really begun to intrude on his happiness and try to murder him and the rest of his family. None had died, but Kordak had finally succeeded in tearing his family apart. For now. Ash turned down a side hall and began heading towards the row of lockers where he had met Calleigh for the first time for the second time. He had bowled her over this time, knocking everything she was carrying into the floor. He stopped over the spot and looked down at the tiles. Even after all this time, nothing seemed to have changed. Everything was in its place.

Ash left the spot and went to find his own locker. The sound of the heels of his shoes clunking against the tiled floor echoed through the empty halls. He stopped walking and listened to the echo. It seemed to grow louder and deeper the longer it lasted. He thought about it for a moment, but in the end he just shook his head and went on. He found his old locker right where it had been his senior year and for years before he arrived. Ash turned his back on the locker and looked up and down the hall. Smiling and shaking his head, Ash swung back around and rapidly

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turned the dial on the lock. He spun the dial to the right, then left and finally again to the right. Pulling the handle up, Ash opened the door and glanced inside. What he saw surprised him. Inside the locker were all of his books and notebooks. There was also a photograph taped on the back wall. A photo of himself with Calleigh and Cole.

“I don’t remember ever having a photo in my locker.”

He reached for the photo and took it from the locker. He held it close to his face. Cole and Calleigh were standing on either side of him. Calleigh’s arm was wrapped around his and Cole’s was around his shoulders. They were all grinning from ear to ear. The picture, though, gave Ash the impression that something horrid had happened. The photograph had been torn into several pieces. Each piece had the appearance of having been crumpled and unfolded many times. The pieces had then been taped together to reconstitute the original image. Ash turned the picture over and scanned the back. There was nothing there but a date. *January 7, 2010*. Ash looked up from the photo to think about that date. That was the day he attacked Brydak’s tower with the help of Cassie, Cole and Jake. Calleigh had been killed by then and Cole was in no mood to smile that day. Neither had he. He flipped the picture back over and the image had changed. The Ash in the photo was now gripping Cole by the throat and an evil countenance had replaced the look of joy. Calleigh, while still clutching his arm, held a knife in her paw that she had driven into his stomach.

Thoroughly frightened, Ash tossed the photograph back into the locker and slammed the door. When the door clanged to, the entire school was lit up and the halls filled with a ringing bell and mingling students. Ash turned his eyes down the hallway, looking out over the tops of the multitude of heads. Out of a classroom down that hall, a head bobbed that Ash had not expected to see. *Cole*. Ash waded into the students and began pushing his way to where he had

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seen the wolf. Pushing students out of his way, excusing himself between private conversations, the fox finally arrived at the door to the classroom. Cole was nowhere to be seen. Ash scanned left and right for the wolf. A gentle noise from inside the classroom drew Ash's glance. He turned and walked back to stand in the open doorway. There was a girl sitting at a desk two rows from the front. Her head was bent forward in her paws and her brown hair was hanging down, hiding her face. Her shoulders were heaving up and down with every sob she gave. Ash walked into the classroom and over to the girl.

“Why are you crying? What’s wrong?”

“You left me.”

Ash took a step back at the sound of her voice. “Calleigh?”

“You left us all. Your brother nearly died the day you left.” She spoke between sobs and coughs. “Why did you leave? That’s all I want to know. Why?”

Ash stepped forward and knelt down on the floor beside her. He did not quite know what to say to her. He was not really sure what she was talking about. “I’m here now. We’ll figure out whatever happened.”

“Why are you coming back?”

“What?” The turnaround had startled Ash.

Calleigh turned her head up and glared at Ash. Her eyes were red from where she had been crying for a long time. The tears she had been shedding were tears of blood. The blood streamed from her eyes and caked the fur on her cheeks. More blood spilled from her mouth the more she spoke, the angrier her words became.

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“Why are you coming back? Why didn’t you just stay away once you were gone!? We told you to stay away! We told you what would happen if you came back! You’re going to die! We’re going to kill you! You’re going to *DIE!!*”

Not knowing what came over him, Ash rose from the floor and bolted from the room, into the now deserted hallway. Calleigh’s words seemed to echo in his vulpine ears. *You’re going to die! We’re going to kill you!* What had he done? The sound of shoes scrapping against the tiled floor drew Ash’s attention. Behind him, Calleigh had exited the room and was coming towards him, a long knife in her paw. Her steps were slow, but determined. Ash kept running. He did not want to fight Calleigh. He hurtled around the next corner and came into a long hallway. Halfway down the hallway, a fur stood looking directly at Ash. The fur was a tall canine. He wore clothes of black over even darker fur. His eyes, however, glowed with a white-hot intensity. The dog raised his paw, motioned for Ash to follow him then turned down a side hall. Ash took off after him. Ash rounded the corner and was knocked flat as a leg swung up and caught him square in the chest.

Ash hit the ground gasping for air. He rolled over on his side and folded his arms across his chest and began coughing. The hard toe of a boot suddenly embedded itself in Ash’s back. His back arched and a pained howl escaped his clenched jaws. Ash looked up through eyes filled with tears of pain. He looked up, straight into the golden eyes of young brother, Micah. Golden *eye*, to be more accurate. Micah’s left eye was intact, but his right had the appearance of having been ripped from its socket. Dried blood matted the fur on the right side of his face. Ash continued to stare at his brother. The young fox’s left ear and arm both had a withered, smoldering appearance. The other fur in the hallway reached down and seized two pawfuls of

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Ash's shirt. The fur pulled him upright and threw the fox against the wall of lockers. Ash's eyes widened in surprise when he saw that the fur was Victor.

Micah pulled a long knife, like the one Calleigh was carrying, from a sheath at the small of his back. He pulled his arm back and hurled the knife towards Ash. The blade found Ash's arm and bore through the fur, skin and bicep. It pierced the bone and exploded out of the back of his arm to pin him against the lockers. Ash cried out in pain. He started to reach over with his left paw to pull the knife free, but Victor seized his wrist and held it tightly. Micah came up and punched Ash hard across the muzzle with his left paw. Ash jerked left; the knife did not move and the wound stretched. As fragile as the paw might look, there was untold strength in the limb. Ash felt as if he had just been hit by a speeding car. Calleigh walked up and joined the little group. She walked up to Ash and rested her left paw on his right shoulder and began to draw it across his chest slowly. Her paw slid down his left arm and took hold of his wrist. Victor stepped away. Calleigh held Ash's arm in place and drove her own knife through his wrist. Glaring into Ash's eyes, she drove her paw into the fox's chest. Ash screamed as he felt her fingers closing around his heart. He could feel the veins and arteries stretching and tearing as she twisted the beating organ inside his chest. Blood bubbled from around her arm and poured down Ash's chest.

“You're going to die. We're going to kill you. You're going to die. I'm going to kill you!”

She pulled back....

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*ASH* shot up, his paw flying to his chest to cover his heart. He was breathing hard and sweat was pouring down his face. He looked around to get his bearings. He was sitting in the back of a car

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moving down a relatively barren avenue. Caitlin was sitting beside him and Sarah was in front the seat, sitting next to the driver. The young lioness looked over at Ash.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Fine. It was a bad dream, that’s all.”

“Sure?”

Ash gave a low chuckle. “Yes, Caitlin, I’m sure.”

He turned his head and looked out the window at the pedestrians on the sidewalk. They had come to another world where furs and humans existed together. The difference here being that they lived in peace with each other. Everywhere on the sidewalks there walked mixed groups of humans and furs, talking and laughing together. Ash saw a couple walking with their arms around each other’s waist. The couple was made up of a tall human male with shaggy dark brown hair and a slightly smaller doe with her own dark brown hair pulled up into a bun on the back of her head. Ash knew their faces as they walked down the sidewalk. *Dan and Penny*. They passed in front of a storefront where numerous furs and humans stood or sat. One fur in particular stuck out from the rest. A tall canine with black fur. The fur seemed to be looking directly at him.

“Can’t be.” The words came as a low whisper.

Sarah turned in her seat. “What?”

“Stop the car!”

The yellow cab came to an abrupt halt. Ash threw open the door and leapt out onto the street. He bounded across the street and up onto the sidewalk. He seized the collar of the dog’s coat and flung him against the brick of the building. Ash moved in as close as he dared to the canid’s face.

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“Who are you?”

The fur gave no reply. He merely turned to black smoke and vanished. Ash stared at the spot on the wall where the fur’s face had been a few seconds before. His paws curled into fists in frustration. He struck the wall once then turned away. Ash strode to the edge of the sidewalk and stopped. He folded his arms across his chest and lowered his head.

“Ash?”

Ash turned at the sound of his name and was face to face with the couple that had passed by a moment before. They must have come back to see what the commotion was about. They were both grinning broadly at the fox. Ash did not return the grin, the black dog filled his thoughts. *Black dog?* Sarah and Caitlin stepped out of the cab and began heading towards the sidewalk.

“Ash?” The doe spoke this time. “It is you, isn’t it? It’s us. Penny and Dan.”

“It’s been a couple years since we last saw you. How have you been?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Ash began casting his eyes about for the sable canid.

“Oh, come on. All the stuff we used to do together in high school and college, and you’re gonna try to tell us that you forgot us?”

“I’m not who you think I am.”

Ash turned from the couple and started down the sidewalk. Caitlin and Sarah stepped up onto the sidewalk. Dan nodded towards Ash as he spoke.

“He a friend of yours?”

“Yes. He’s been under a lot of stress recently.”

“Yeah? How recently?”

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“Six years. Give or take.”

Sarah and Caitlin parted company with the couple and started after Ash. They found him standing on a corner one street over. Ash’s eyes were darting from building to building, face to face. He began turning about to gaze first down one street and then another. Sarah and Caitlin were becoming very worried about Ash. They had never seen him act so frantic before. He looked as if he had suddenly lost his mind. Ash abruptly stopped turning. His paws curled into fists. Sarah was sure if they got any tighter his palms would bleed.

“Damn it!”

The exclamation startled the two of them. Caitlin walked forward and lightly touched Ash’s arm. Ash did not react immediately. His mind was still focusing on the ebony furred canine. *Why does his fur color worry me?* Sarah appeared right in front of him, blocking his line of sight.

“Ash. What’s wrong?” There was concern in her eyes. “What are you looking for?”

Ash sighed. “That dog from before.”

Caitlin looked worriedly at Ash. “What dog?”

“Don’t do that. That’s not even remotely funny.”

“I’m not trying to be funny. I didn’t see a dog.”

“She’s right, Ash. You jumped out of the cab and ran to sidewalk and attacked a building. You had us scared.”

“You didn’t see him?”

Caitlin and Sarah shook their heads in the negative.

“I’m not crazy. He was there.”

“We never said you were crazy.”



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“No, but you’re thinking it.” Ash sighed again and ran his right paw through his headfur. He began slowly and quietly, “He was there. I know he was. I had him. I could feel the fabric of his coat in my paws. He was...”

“Ash. Stop. We believe you.” Sarah placed a paw on his shoulder to stop him. “What did he look like?”

Ash nodded. “He was tall, about my height. I’m not real sure what kind of dog he was, but he had real dark black fur, which bothers me for some reason.”

“Black?”

“Yeah. Mean something to you?”

“Yes, but I wish it didn’t.” Sarah fell silent for a moment.

Ash looked to Caitlin, who shrugged in confusion. “Don’t keep us in suspense, Sarah.”

“Have you ever heard any of the black dog legends?” Sarah paused. When Ash shook his head, she continued. “The legend goes back a very long way. There’s been a few variations. In some the black dogs travel alone, in others in packs. Some authors have even used the creature as a plot device in their stories.”

“Can we skip to the bad part, please?”

“The black dog is an omen of death. Seeing one means that you, or somefur close to you, will die.”

“Oh great. Now, I think I would prefer being insane. So, who gets to be the lucky one to keel over?”

The three of them fell silent for a few minutes. Silently, Ash turned and began walking down the sidewalk. Caitlin trotted up beside him while Sarah hung back a little ways. They

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walked quietly towards the next intersection. They came to a stop at the corner. Ash's ears drooped a bit.

"If I..."

Sarah cut him off. "You won't. Nothing's gonna happen. To you, or anyfur else. Not if we can help it. Right, Caitlin?"

"Right. We'll keep you safe."

Ash chuckled. "No fur's ever said that to me before. At least, not since I was thirteen." Ash turned to face Caitlin and Sarah. "So, what's our next move?"

"We find Cassie. Then we find this black dog. And, kick his ass."

Ash nodded then began looking around the intersection. He saw what he was looking for and crossed the street. He walked up to a phone booth and stepped inside. Opening the phonebook, Ash began thumbing through the thin sheets of paper. He stopped when he reached the residential section of the book. Ash began scanning the pages slowly until he found the page he wanted. He ran his finger down the page. Resting the book on a small metal shelf under the phone, Ash held up his left paw. In a flash of blue light, a notepad and a pen appeared in his paw. He wrote something in the pad then closed the phonebook and let it fall to hang under the phone. Ash stepped out of the booth and, tearing the piece of paper in half, gave the bottom half to Sarah. On the paper was two street addresses.

"There are four Cassie Archer's in town. Well, two Cassie's, one Cassandra and a Cassiopeia."

"Cassiopeia?"

"I don't know. Maybe her parents were hippies, or something. They all have the last name Archer, so we might as well check it out."

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“So which one’s did we get?”

“You got one of the Cassie’s and I’m gonna let you have the pleasure of meeting Cassiopeia.”

“Oh, you’re too kind. We’ll let you know if we find her.”

“Right. Good luck.”

Caitlin put her arms around Ash’s waist and squeezed. Ash put his arms around her shoulders and gave her a light kiss on the top of her head. Sarah and Caitlin turned and walked off down the street to find the first Cassie Archer on their short list. Ash watched them go then turned and crossed the intersection. The fox plodded along down the sidewalk, occasionally glancing at the small piece of paper in his paw. He turned the next corner and walked up to a human standing at a newsstand.

“Excuse me. Can you tell me how to get to 415, East 71<sup>st</sup>? I’m a little lost.”

“East 71<sup>st</sup>?” The man paused to think. “Oh, I remember. You go down this street for another four blocks then make a left onto Crescent. You’ll want to follow that for—two blocks. Then go left and there’s East 71<sup>st</sup>. As for 415, you’ll have to find it when you get there. I’m not that good.”

Ash gave a small smile. “All right. Thank you.”

The man nodded to Ash then went back to what he was doing. Ash turned and walked down the sidewalk for four blocks. When he got to the intersection at Crescent, he turned left and headed up the road. Two blocks later, he turned onto East 71<sup>st</sup> and began searching for number 415. It did not take long to find the building. He headed inside and found a set of stairs. This Cassie Archer lived in an apartment on the third floor. He moved quickly up the staircase. Stopping long enough to catch his breath, Ash walked to the door of the apartment. Ash took

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second to collect his thoughts then rapped on the door with his knuckles. It was not long before the door was pulled open. In the doorway there stood a small woman with short red hair and bright blue eyes. She smiled, as she looked Ash over from head to toe.

“Well, hello there.”

“Afternoon.”

“What can we do for you?”

“I’m looking for a friend. I haven’t seen her in a long time.”

“This friend of yours, she got a name?” The woman had a very singsong voice.

“Cassie. Cassie Archer.”

“Ah. Well, you don’t look like her type. Then again, she has been known to experiment a bit when she’s out having fun.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t think I know what you mean.”

“Whatever. I’ll get her. Wait here.”

The woman turned and walked back into the apartment. Ash stood in the hallway and waited. He glanced up the hallway to see the same black dog from his nightmare and the street. The dog vanished the moment Ash set eyes on him. Movement in the doorway drew his gaze. The new face in the entrance belonged to a wall woman with short, curly brown hair. Her vivid green eyes were enough to tell Ash that his search would go on. The woman smiled at Ash, as she too looked him over.

“Well.” She began slowly, a slight lilt in her voice. “Don’t think I know you, stranger. But we could always change that.”

Ash’s ears drooped a bit. “I’m sorry. I must have the wrong address.”

“That’s a pity. Sure you won’t come in for even a little bit?”

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“I’m sure.” Ash turned from the door and headed towards the staircase. “Sorry to bother you.” Ash walked down the stairs and exited the building. He looked at the piece of paper at the other address. 616 Crescent. Ash slipped the paper into his jacket pocket and started back towards the intersection. He glanced around, looking for some clue on which way to go. His eyes settled on the brass numbers on the buildings. The fox turned up the street; heading in what he hoped was the right direction. The numbers on the buildings were increasing. 586. 588. 590. He continued until he stood in front of number 616. This building, like all the rest, had a white façade with a polished black door. Ash walked up the steps in front and stood before the door. On the wall beside the door was a series of buttons with names printed beside each. Ash scanned down the list until he saw the button labeled *C. Archer*. Taking a deep breath to calm himself, Ashe reached up and depressed the button. He waited a moment for a response. The speaker crackled to life and then a soothing voice issued from the device.

“Hello?” The voice was unfamiliar to Ash.

*Maybe that’s the intercom distortion.* “Hello. Is this... is this Cassandra Archer?”

“Yes, it is. Who’s this?”

Ash swallowed. “My name’s Ash. Ash Reynolds.”

“Sorry, I’m not interested.”

“No, wait!” He could not let her leave. “I’m not selling anything. I’m looking for a friend. A dear friend I lost track of some time ago.”

There was silence at the other end for the longest time. “Why come here? Why ask me? There’s not someone else you could talk to?”

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“I came because.... I’m here because my furiend’s name is Cassie Archer. I just... I thought... hoped you were her.” Ash cursed his luck under his breath. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you. I’ll go.”

Ash sighed and turned down the stairs. He descended to the street and began heading towards the corner, when he hear the sound of a window being pushed open and a voice call after him.

“Hey!”

Ash turned around and saw a beautiful canine sticking her head out the window and smiling at him. Ash recognized her as a maned wolf. Her fur was mostly a very light grey almost mist like color. There was a ragged patch of white fur on her throat. Her arms were covered in darker feathery grey fur. Her mane and the tips of her ears had the same coloration. The canid’s eyes had a grayish-blue hue to them and were full of kindness. Ash had never seen anyfur like her before in his life.

“I wanted to wish you luck. I hope you find who you’re looking for.”

Ash smiled back at her. “Thank you.”

She smiled then pulled her head back in the apartment. Ash turned and continued to the corner. He stepped over to a tall lamppost and leaned against the metal structure. *Maybe Sarah and Caitlin will have better luck.* He folded his arms across his chest and closed his eyes to think. He knew the two felines would contact him when, or if, they found Cass. He reached his right paw underneath his jacket where he had the three knives hidden. Two with a solid blade; one still translucent and hollow. He squeezed the handle of the final knife then pulled his paw from inside his coat. He tried not to think about anything and just listened to the sounds around him. He heard the many and varying sounds of car engines as the vehicles moved along the long

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stretch of black asphalt. Shoes and boots plodding against concrete. Voices drifting through the air, carrying on various conversations.

Ash opened his eyes and scanned the street. Coming down the sidewalk was a pair of humans walking arm in arm. The man walked his arm wrapped around the woman's shoulders. He was tall and had short blond hair with gold-tinted brown eyes. The woman, arm around his waist, had long black hair and dark brown eyes. It took Ash a moment to recognize them, but then again the last time he had seen the two humans... *They both had ice blue eyes and fangs.* They came down the sidewalk and moved past Ash, but they stopped at the corner and turned to look at the fox. The woman separated from the man and walked closer to the fox. Ash turned his head to look at the woman. She stared back at him for a few moments before a smile began to spread across her face.

“Ash?”

*Not again.* “Sorry?”

“Kellen, it's Ash. I think.”

The man walked over and looked at Ash. He seemed to be looking right into Ash's eyes.  
“I don't believe it. It is you.”

“Told you.”

“So, you actually went through with it?”

Ash looked from the man, Kellen, to Bianca, the woman. “You must have me confused with somefur else.”

Bianca walked around to Ash's left and looked him over. “Why's the tail so long?”

“Excuse me?”

“Knew ya wanted a change, but I never actually thought you were serious.”

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“Look. I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m just a fox looking for a friend.”

“What’s with you? You’ve always been happy to see us in the past. Did something happen between you and Micah? You two got along, but when you guys fought, you fought.” Bianca paused for a moment. “How is Micah, by the way? Heard he married that panther. What was her name?”

Kellen spoke up. “Cassie.”

Ash’s ears perked up and he turned his eyes on the man. *Cassie! She married Micah.* “That’s why I couldn’t find her.” His voice was low, more to himself. He looked up at the humans. “I have to go.”

Ash walked between the two humans and turned around the corner. He moved swiftly down the sidewalk, eyes darting around for a phone booth. The back of his right paw began to tingle. He stopped and looked down. The symbols hidden in his fur were glowing faintly. He raised his paw and turned it over, palm facing up. A disc of blue energy appeared and sat on the tips of his fingers. The disc flashed and a small figure appeared standing in the center. The figure was an eight-inch projection of Caitlin. She was standing with her paws cupped in front of her. She did not look happy.

“No good?” Ash’s question seemed to startle her.

“What? Oh, no. We didn’t find her. Oh, and Sarah wanted me to tell you that Cassiopeia was a real flower child. Whatever that means.”

“Okay.” He chuckled. “And, I know you didn’t find her, but I also know why.” Ash spotted a phone booth and jogged over to it.



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Caitlin turned her head to side then looked back at Ash with a quizzical look on her face. “I’m not following you.”

Ash stepped into the booth and picked up the phonebook. “I’ll explain it when I see you. Meet me at...” Ash paused as he flipped through the book. “406 Camden. Got that?”

“406 Camden. Okay. Is everything all right?”

“It will be in a little bit. See you in a minute.”

The figure and disc vanished as Ash stepped out of the phone booth. He started down the sidewalk and, stopping the first citizen he came to, asked how to get to Camden Street. He followed the directions and soon turned onto Camden. Sarah and Caitlin appeared on a corner on the opposite side of the street. Ash waved them over. When they had joined him, the three started down the street looking for number 406. Ash explained what was going on to the girls.

“The Cassie here married Micah. She wasn’t listed as an Archer at all.”

Sarah began to slow down. “Um, Ash.”

There were three police cars and an ambulance sitting in front of one of the buildings, and their lights were flashing. Ash continued forward at a slower pace. His heart sank when he realized the emergency vehicles were parked in front of the building they needed to get inside. There was a small crowd gathered around to watch what was happening.

“Oh, no.”

Ash pushed his way through to the front of the crowd. There was a detective standing at the base of the front steps. Standing before him were two furs Ash could not stop staring at. A wolf and a leopard. *Cole! Jake!* It had been so long since the last time he had seen them as furs. They looked worried. Cole glanced away from the detective and clapped eyes on Ash. The wolf leaned in and turned the detective’s attention on the fox. The detective turned and motioned for

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Ash to come forward. Glancing back at Sarah and Caitlin, Ash walked past two officers and moved to the detective. Cole and Jake gave Ash sad smiles before turning away. The detective pulled Ash to the side.

“You’re Ash Reynolds?”

*Might not be a bad idea to play along.* “Yes. Is something wrong?”

“They told me you had the op, but I’ve never seen one up close.”

“What happened?”

“Right. I’m sorry to have to tell you this. A little while ago someone broke into your brother’s apartment and attacked him and his wife. Your brother’s dead.”

“What? How?” *This is so wrong.* “Can I see him?”

“Well... sure. I don’t see why not. But, remember, don’t touch anything.”

Ash followed the detective into the building and up to the apartment that belonged to this dimension’s Micah. *This is so wrong. I should not be doing this.* The detective stopped and spoke to a uniformed feline then stepped into the apartment. Ash slipped past the officer and headed through the entryway. Everything in the apartment gave off a general sense of peace save for the hushed conversations and the bright camera flashes. Ash stepped into the living room and was immediately taken aback by the horror within. The body of a human male was arranged in a reclined position on the couch. His head, however, was on the floor a good two meters away. Ash tore his eyes away from the body and looked around the apartment. His eyes stopped on a photo sitting on a chest against the wall. It was a wedding photo. In the photo, the man stood with his arm around a beautiful panther’s waist.

The detective walked away from Ash to speak with one of the other officers present in the room. Ash continued to walk around the room, trying to stay as much out of the way as

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possible. He stopped close enough to the detective that he could catch snippets of their exchange. He continued to cast his eyes about the room as he listened.

“We found something odd, sir.” The officer’s voice was hushed and she sounded confused by something.

“What do you mean by odd?”

“We found blood in the hall bathroom. There’s blood in the sink and the tub.”

“The killer might’ve washed his hands. Or, paws.”

“That would explain the sink, but not the tub. But, that’s not the strange thing. There’s only blood, no water.”

*Blood, but no water?* It sounded utterly preposterous. He caught sight of a folded newspaper on the corner of the coffee table. He couldn’t read it the way it was folded. “Could you turn that around for me?” The officer kneeling on the floor obliged and unfolded the paper and set it where Ash could see it. The headline read: *Habemus Papum!*

“They got a new Pope.” His hushed voice went unnoticed.

He read further. His eyes settled on the name of the new Pope; his blood froze in his veins. “Peter II!?”

The detective turned at the sound of Ash’s voice. “Pardon?”

“Oh God, no. No, no, no.”

Ash did not explain. He turned and ran out of the apartment. Vaulting down the stairs, Ash emerged out into the open air and started towards Sarah and Caitlin, but stopped. He wheeled around and went to Cole and Jake.

“Where’s Cassie?”

“What?” Cole seemed dazed.

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“Cassie! Where is she?”

Jake stepped forward. “Calleigh took her back to our place.”

“Where? What’s the address?”

“Ash, are you feeling all right?”

“Just tell me the address. Please.”

The leopard gave him the address and Ash turned and ran back to his feline companions. Taking them by the elbows, Ash lead them away from the crowd and they began to find their way to the home of Jake and Calleigh O’Connell. *This is just too much.* Ash crossed the street with the felines close behind him. Sarah kept calling after him to stop, but he was not listening to her. His mind was working too fast. *This can’t be happening!* Caitlin picked up her pace and took hold of Ash’s wrist, bringing him to a stop.

“What’s up?”

Ash sought for the right words. “I think the world’s ending.”

“Ending?” Sarah looked down at Caitlin. “Ending ending?”

Ash shrugged his shoulders. He looked around and saw a park one block over from where they were. He turned and set off towards the park. As they walked past the buildings, the door to one burst open and humans and furs came running out crying pain. They were all covered in ghastly boils and each bore a mark that seemed burned into their foreheads. Ash got a glimpse of the mark and his stomach knotted. The mark had the appearance of three sixes rotated around a single point and joined together.

“Dear God!” Ash jumped back from the crowd. “We’ll cut through the park. C’mon!”

The three furs barreled through the group of humans and furs and ran for the park. They made it and continued running until they came to a fountain at the heart of the park. The water

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coming from the fountain began to come less and less. The flow abated until there was nothing more than a bubbling emission. Ash watched the water. *We're wasting time, but I have to be sure.* He breathed hard as he waited, slipping his paw under his coat and bringing out the purple crystalline knife. The water suddenly began to flow again, but it was not water. The liquid that issued forth was deep red in color. Some of the fluid splashed out onto the sidewalk. *Blood.* Sarah walked forward and stood beside Ash.

“You meant the End. As in, the Apocalypse?”

“Sure looks that way.” Turning from the fountain, Ash started away from towards the opposite side of the park. “Let’s go. We have to hurry.”

Ash ran to the other side of the street once they had emerged from the park, the knife glowing in his paw. Ash started down the sidewalk, Sarah and Caitlin close behind him. He almost walked across to the next street when he caught sight of motion to his right. He looked and there was the same black dog from before. This time, however, Sarah and Caitlin saw him as well. The dog motioned for them to follow him, as he slowly began walking backwards. Ash turned and headed after him, quickening his pace with each step. The canine started to drift towards the edge of the sidewalk as the sky began to darken. Ash glanced upward briefly but quickly returned his gaze to his quarry. Caitlin looked up and saw that the darkening was not caused by clouds moving in to cover the sky. The sun itself was beginning to darken and to turn completely black. In moments the entire world was plunged into an unbearable darkness. The only illumination left in the world, it seemed, came from the glowing knife in Ash’s paws and the blazing yellow orbs that were the black dog’s eyes.

They followed the pair of eyes through the pitch-black world. The glow emanating from the purple blade grew brighter the further they traveled. The ground heaved suddenly throwing

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all of them off their hindpaws. Ash hit the ground hard, the glowing knife skittering from his grasp. Caitlin stumbled and fell, her right hindpaw catching on some unseen thing. She twisted as she went crashing to the pavement. There was a crack as the bones in her ankle shattered. Caitlin's cry drew Ash's attention. He looked back trying to find her in the overwhelming blackness. The lioness saw his blue eyes glowing in the distance. The pair of eyes began to move closer to her. Behind him, the purple blade suddenly floated up into the air. The blade floated around and was joined by the yellow eyes of the sable canid. Caitlin was about to cry out to Ash when a great tumult rose up and drowned out all other sound. The sound of horses neighing drifted to the furs' ears out of the darkness.

Ash and the others looked around in the direction of the sound and saw a great white horse riding out of the darkness. On the horse was a human wearing a crown and carrying a large bow and arrow. A second horse trotted up beside the first. The man that rode the horse was large, his chest bare. In his great hands he carried a large sword, held at the ready. The blade of the sword was drenched in blood. The two horseman were perfectly visible in the blackness that had swallowed the world. Neither rider seemed to notice the group of furs, lying motionless where the quake had deposited them. The horsemen began to trot slowly towards and right past the furs. Ash watched the two carefully as they moved further down the street. A paw slipped under his arm and pulled him up. Ash looked around and his eyes locked with the yellow eyes they had been following. The black dog held up the glowing knife and held it out for Ash to take. Ash took it then moved to help Caitlin and Sarah.

Hefting Caitlin from the pavement, Ash turned to the dog. "Why are you helping us? The Archangels said..."

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“The Archangels.” There was a hint of contempt in his voice. “Those high and mighty winged fools. Where are these great agents of God now?”

Ash glared at the dog. He was not sure how to respond. “I don’t know, but you didn’t answer my question. Why are you helping us? I thought black dogs were omens of death.”

“We are. We are also guides for lost travelers. As to why I am here, a friend asked me to help. I’ve been shadowing you since you retrieved the leopard’s soul. Now, we must hurry if we’re to find the panther before something happens to her.”

Ash held Caitlin close and she wrapped her arms around his neck. “How’s your ankle?”

“I think it’s broken.”

“There isn’t time. You can worry about that when we’re out of here.”

The dog turned and began walking away. A dim light began to radiate from his dark fur and clothes. Ash looked at Caitlin and then at Sarah. They both nodded and they set off after the canine. As they walked, Sarah pulled out her bow and took an arrow from the quiver hidden under her coat. Voices crying out in fear and pain came to their ears from all directions. A great neighing went up from somewhere off to their left. The world suddenly began to glow a faint orange color. Ash looked around in every direction for the source of the glow before turning his eyes towards the sky. Out of the sky, hundreds of thousands of glowing streams of light were raining down towards the city. The streams drew closer and were revealed to be flames falling from the sky. One of the flaming missiles struck a car parked on the side of the road sending up a blinding flash as the vehicle exploded. The explosion illuminated the world briefly, showing the group another rider on a pale horse. The rider had a skeletal appearance and carried a large scythe. The rider suddenly looked around and seemed to have caught sight of the group. He turned his horse and trotted towards them.

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“Barghest? What are you doing with these creatures?”

“Ah, Death. How are you? How’s the family?”

“Answer me, mongrel! Where are you taking them? Judgment is coming. They cannot escape it, no matter what you do for them.”

“But, my lord....”

“Death!” The new voice startled the group as all turned to see the newcomer. A large fennec dressed in robes and armor and carrying a sword of orange flames stood in the center of the street.

“Michael.” Ash breathed the name.

“My good rider, these three furs are not of this world and thereby not subject to the tribulations unfolding here.”

“So, now you’re telling me how to do my job, Archangel? What if I did the same to you?”

“There’ll be no need for that. I am not telling how to do your job; I’m telling you that by dealing with these three, you are not doing your job. One quarter of this world’s population has been set-aside for you. So, take this Hell that is following you and go deal with them, but leave them alone.”

The skeletal figure glared at the Archangel for a moment. “So be it.” The horseman wheeled his horse around and bolted off past Michael and into the darkness.

Michael watched after the horseman then sighed. He turned his blue eyes on the black dog. “Death rose a good point a moment ago, Barghest. Why are you helping Ash and his furiends? If I’m not mistaken, you have never before in your entire existence helped any being out of danger. You have only ever led poor souls to their demise. Why stop now?”



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Barghest looked rather unsettled by the question. Ash thought that the canid might not answer the powerful chief angel, but Barghest dropped his gaze. “I’m here because I was asked to be here.”

“Asked? By whom? Sophiel?”

“No. The young Kordak. He’s a furiend of mine.”

Ash turned to the dog. “Kordak!?”

“He felt poorly for not being able to help the fox more than he did when the humans had him, so he asked me to look after him.”

“Does Fenrisulfr know what you’re up to? I hear he’s not as forgiving as Lucifer is, which I believe is saying something.”

“No, Archangel, he does not know. And, I am well aware of what will happen to me when he does find out.”

Ash stepped forward. “Look, I don’t care about this Fenrisulfr or what he’s gonna do to you. I don’t care about you or your little Armageddon. I care about Cassie and my furiends. Let’s move.”

The black dog looked at Ash and nodded then turned his eyes back on the fennec. “If you’ll excuse us.”

A small smile appeared on the Archangels muzzle before he faded away in a haze of blue light. Barghest led Ash, Sarah and Caitlin down the street and around the corner. There, they were met by two more black dogs, both giving dark stares to Barghest. Their guide stopped dead in his tracks. The two dogs turned and took a step towards the small group. The first of the two carried a sword with a blade that curved forward. The other held a long chain of black iron links and at the end, a strange weapon resembling three demonic looking claws. They moved closer,

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the one brandishing the sword smiling evilly and letting out a low chuckle. Barghest took steps back away from them, nearly bumping into Ash and Caitlin. The second canid lashed out with the chain, the claw flashing dangerously close to Barghest's muzzle. The two canines laughed as Barghest recoiled from the strike.

“Why so skittish, Barghest?” The first stepped closer. “You seem so frightened.”

Even in the faint light the canid emitted, Ash could see that Barghest was indeed visibly shaken by the other two black dogs.

The first glanced back at his companion. “What do you think, Hati? Doesn't he seem a little—on edge?”

“You're right, Skoll. What's wrong, Bargie? Not happy to see us?” The canid chuckled.

“I have no quarrel with either of you.”

“That's where you're wrong, Bargie.” The first, Skoll, pointed his sword at Barghest's chest. “You're shirking your duties and father doesn't like that.”

“Not only shirking duty, but hiding from father.” Hati said, swinging the claw about. “Took us forever to find you. How did you manage that one, I wonder?”

Barghest swallowed. “By leaving my weapons behind. I know Fenrisulfr can track us through them.”

Ash silently and gently set Caitlin on the ground.

“Well, well, well.”

Skoll leapt forward his sword flashing out. There was an echoing clang as the blade contacted with the tempered steel of Ash's own sword. Ash pushed the black dog back and stood between the three canids. Hati spun the claw around and let it fly at Ash. Ash brought his sword up to slice at the chain, but it recoiled from the blow. The claw twisted around and began

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wrapping around the fox's arm. More of the chain coiled around the blade of the sword. The claw reared back then sank itself into the flesh of Ash's shoulder. Ash cried out as Hati pulled back on the chain, the claws digging deeper into his flesh. The claw suddenly dislodged and flashed up across his face, slicing through his eye in the process. Ash clutched at the wound with his left paw as he slumped to his knees.

“Stay down, pup. Our quarrel is with Bargie, not you.” Skoll chuckled as he spoke.

“Then you quarrel is with me.”

Ash's voice came out deep, as if two voices speaking as one. Ash stood, pulling his paw from over his eye. The gashes vanished and his eye returned and started glowing brightly. Blue energy surged over Ash's body. The chain wrapped around his arm began glowing brightly right before it exploded in a blue flash. The fox, his deep orange fur now giving off a golden sheen, held his sword at the ready. Skoll flashed forward and swung his sword through a high arc aiming it down at Ash's shoulder. Ash swung his blade up to meet the oncoming claw-like sword. The blades met, Skoll's shattering as Ash's continued on the upward arc. Ash reversed the motion and spun the sword back around, pivoting on the ball of this hindpaw. He spun and brought the sword around towards Skoll's throat. The edge of the blade stopped just as it was about to rend the flesh that stood between the stagnant air and the sable canine's carotid.

“Now, listen very carefully.” His voice seemed to rumble through the air. “You will leave. You will leave and cease to follow us. What we're doing, we must do for the sake of the entire universe. If we fail, everything is destroyed. Do you understand me? Everything!”

The two brothers' faces showed their fear at these words. They both stood back and bowed to Ash and then turned and vanished in two clouds of thick, black smoke. Ash relaxed and

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lowered his sword, his fur losing its golden radiance. The sword vanished in a pulse of pale blue light. Ash turned and walked to where he had set Caitlin and lifted her again.

“Lead on, Barghest.”

Barghest nodded and resumed leading them to Cassie. Along the way, they were all silent, until Caitlin spoke up.

“Ash?”

He glanced at her. “Yeah?”

“Did you mean that?”

“What? That the existence of everything hinges on whether we succeed or not?”

“Yeah, that. Well?”

Ash let out a low chuckle. “No. I just needed to get rid of them and make sure they never come back. Figured, if I didn’t kill ‘em, they’d keep following us so they could pay me back for the humiliation. But, if I did kill them, their father, this Fenrisulfr, might come after us himself, which would be just as bad as having those two on our tails.”

A loud cracking sound tore through the darkened world, rending the silence that had seemed to swallow the world once Ash had stopped talking. This time, they did not stop to try and determine the source of the sound. They kept moving towards Cassie. An eerie glow began to illuminate the darkness. Ash glanced around and saw that the light was emanating from a deep fissure that had opened up and was spread down the street. All manner of clawed appendages were reaching up out of the crevice, trying to get a hold of the ground to pull up whatever grotesque creature was attached to them. The first of many crawled out of the cleft and stood on the street, looking all around. Ash had never seen anything so horrid in all his life. The creature stood as tall as Ash did, three long horns protruded from its skull, sweeping forward.

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Caitlin cringed. “What now?”

“Well, I guess that makes sense.”

Sarah looked at Ash, still moving. “What?”

“Death’s already rode through, now it’s Hell’s turn.” He passed Caitlin to Sara. “Take her. I’ll deal with any of these things that gets near us. I’ll be right behind you.”

Sarah nodded and took Caitlin. She moved off and Ash followed, walking slowly backwards so he could keep an eye on the demons crawling out of Hell on Main Street. The first demon, now sniffing the air, caught sight of Ash. The fox continued to back away as his paws erupted in bright blue energy. The demon opened its wide maw and hissed then bounded towards him. Ash launched two spheres of energy towards the fiend. The spheres connected and the demon was engulfed in roiling flames. Crying out in pain with a demonic howl, the demon crumpled to the ground and burned away. A new horde of demons surged forward. Ash let out a concussive wave of energy that washed over the horde, incinerating the demons. The fox turned and ran as more demons began pouring out of the rift. The bow Sarah had given him long ago, Jake’s bow, appeared in his left paw as he ran. Rotating at the waist, Ash aimed an arrow of pure energy behind him and released it. The arrow pierced the lead demon’s head. *One down, countless more to go. Will it never end?*

Ash hurtled around the next corner, shooting arrows behind him when he had to. He glanced ahead and saw Sarah, Caitlin, Barghest and Cassie. *Cassie!* Barghest turned and ran towards him, holding out his right paw.

“Give me your sword!”

Ash’s sword appeared in his paw and he tossed it to Barghest. The black dog continued past him and into the oncoming demons, slicing off limbs and severing heads. Ash ran towards

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Cassie, taking her into his arms and lifting her from the ground. The panther smiled, despite their situation, and wrapped her arms around the fox's neck. He set her down to get a good look at her. She looked beautiful, but there were tears in her eyes. *She did watch Micah die.* He hugged her again then pulled out the purple crystalline knife. Cassie stepped forward.

“Before you start, I want to say that I knew you'd come. I never doubted you for a second. Never blamed you.”

“Thanks, Cass. Cole and Jake didn't either.” Ash paused a moment. “Cass, who attacked Micah? What did he look like?”

“I don't know. He was hidden in dark energy the entire time. All I saw were his eyes. Those glowing, red eyes. It was horrible.”

Ash touched her shoulder to calm her. “Don't worry. Everything will be fine now. Now, hold still.”

Cassie stood still and looked into Ash's blue eyes as he pointed the tip of the knife at her heart. He smiled reassuringly at the feline before stabbing the knife into her chest, the symbols on his paw radiating blur energy. The blade did not pierce her skin so much as passed into it. There was no blood and no pain. Just a soothing warmth coursing through her body. She flashed purple, as her soul was drawn into the blade of the knife. Ash retracted the blade and caught Cassie as her limp body started to crumple to the ground. He lowered her gently to the sidewalk and leaned over her, making sure the body still lived. Once sure, Ash turned his eyes skyward and waited. Barghest continued to fight off the demons that tried to push their way onto the street. A purple flash lit up the sky leaving behind a large sigil that seemed painted on the blackness.

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The sigil pulsed a couple times before flashing intensely and vanishing. Ash looked away from the sky and down at the panther lying on the ground. After a moment, she stirred and opened her eyes. Gazing up, she saw Ash. She smiled up at him but cocked her head to the side. She looked quizzically for a moment at the fox. The panther pushed herself up into a sitting position and looked around.

“Where am I? What happened?”

Ash offered his paw to help her up. “I guess I saved you. I’m actually not sure how it all works, but you’re back in your own body.”

She looked at Ash again, a flash in the sky better illuminating his face. “Ash?”

“Um...” *What should I say?* “Sort of. My name is Ash, but I’m not who you think.”

“Oh. Well...” She jumped forward and threw her arms around his neck. “I don’t care. You saved me. You got me out of that lonely, black room. I could die right now and still be content.”

“Be careful how loud you say that.”

“Ash!”

Ash turned and saw Barghest rushing towards them, hordes of demons out on his tail. As he neared them, a wall of opalescent energy out of nowhere between the demons and the running canid. The demons unlucky enough to collide with the wall were instantly and violently destroyed. Demon after demon impacted on the shield, their skin erupting in turbulent, iridescent flames. The shield pulled back, staying right behind Barghest. When he had joined the others, the shield curved around to form a bubble of energy protecting the furs. Ash glanced around the barrier then around at the other furs. He then looked at each fur in turn. When he

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looked at Caitlin, Ash saw the energy was flowing from her paws into the ground and was then effusing up through the pavement. He smiled at her then returned his attention to Barghest.

The sable canid stood breathing hard. “Is it done?”

“Yeah.” Ash looked Barghest over. In the glow of numerous small fires that had erupted around the area, Ash could make out large amounts of blood staining Barghest’s clothing. “You gonna make it?”

“I will be fine.” Barghest offered back the sword. “Now, it’s time we left. I do not wish to be here when the War comes.”

“What about her?” Caitlin looked around at Cassie. “What should she do?”

Ash turned and looked at her. “I don’t know. I can’t promise that everything’ll be fine, because I just don’t know.”

Cassie reached up and touched Ash’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about me anymore. I’m sure I’ll be okay. Now, go do what you need to.”

Ash nodded and then walked to the others. Caitlin extended a tunnel from the barrier to the building. Cassie smiled at her then followed the tunnel and pushed open the door, entering. Caitlin stood, cupping her paws before her. A small pinpoint of blue light appeared floating in her paws. In an instant, the barrier vanished and the pinpoint enlarged, engulfing the four furs. The demons swarmed them, but it was too late. The glowing sphere suddenly contracted back into a pinpoint of light and streaked skyward. The demons stop and watch the light as it soared out of their reach. The pinpoint shrank more and vanished completely from sight.

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*BARGHEST* slumped to the floor of the large white room, blood dripping from his wounded arm. Sarah knelt beside him and looked at his wound. Ash sat down beside Caitlin to look at her ankle. He touched it gingerly a few times, causing the lioness to wince in pain.

“Sorry.” He examined her ankle once more then looked her in the eye. “It’s broken all right. I’m gonna set it, which’ll hurt. Then I’ll see if I can speed up the healing.”

“Okay.”

Ash took hold of her hindpaw with one paw and held her leg just above her ankle with the other. He glanced at Caitlin’s face to see if she were ready. She nodded and he twisted. There was a cracking sound as he pushed the bones back into place. The lioness flinched, but did not cry out. Ash gave her an apologetic smile then placed his paws on either side of the break. *I hope this works.* Ash’s paws began to glow as blue energy swirled around her ankle, appearing as bandages of light. The bands of energy tightened then seeped into the fur and flesh of the lioness’s leg. The pain faded away along with the glowing covering. He pulled his paws away and examined her ankle again. He turned her hindpaw left and right to see if it caused her any pain. When he was satisfied, Ash sat back and smiled at her.

“There you go.”

Caitlin sat forward and put her arms around Ash’s neck. “Thank you.”

“No problem.” He returned the hug then stood and moved to where *Barghest* sat. “I seem to be getting the hang of this healing thing. You want me to look at your shoulder?”

*Barghest* glanced up at Ash, but shook his head. “No, thank you.”

“You sure?”

The sable canid shook his head once again. “I am sure, Ash. Thank you.”

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Barghest stared at Ash for a moment. The fox was not looking at him, but over his head at something else. Sarah noticed this too and turned to look. There behind the group stood Michael along with another black dog that rivaled him in stature. Michael and the canine were walking towards them and talking back and forth. Barghest struggled to his hindpaws when he saw the large canid. As they drew near, the furs could hear the end of the conversation between the Archangel and the black dog.

“So, you see, my dear Fenrisulfr, Barghest’s aid was requested. He was asked to remain in the shadows for as long as he could, letting none know where he was at anytime. Knowing that you would be able to track him, I asked him to leave his weapons behind. It was imperative that these travelers succeed in their appointed task, but it would seem that I made a slight miscalculation when I asked Barghest and did not consult you. Can you forgive an old friend, Fenrisulfr?”

The black dog looked at Michael and smiled. “Of course, I can, Michael. I must confess, though. I did not send Skoll and Hati to find Barghest. I was worried about the young pup and they may have taken that the wrong way and thought I wanted him dead. Those two always were trouble. I would very much like to meet the one that put them in their place so expertly.”

“Well, here he is.” Michael indicated Ash. “Ash Reynolds. Ash, this is Fenrisulfr, leader of the Black Dogs.”

Fenrisulfr stepped forward and extended his paw. Ash glanced from the paw to the dog’s face. Shooting a quick glance at Sarah, Ash took the paw and shook it.

“It’s a pleasure to make you acquaintance. Those two needed the lesson.”

“Um, your welcome.” Ash was confused. *I thought he was supposed to be worse than Lucifer?*

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Fenrisulfr turned his attention on Barghest. “And, as for you.” Laying paw on Barghest’s shoulder, the sound began to heal and the pain to subside. “As always, well done. I could never be more proud of any of my agents. Now, come. We must go.”

“Yes, my lord.” Barghest turned to Ash. “It has been an honor and I wish you well.”

“You, as well. Stay outta trouble.”

The black dog chuckled. “I will try.” He nodded to Sarah and Caitlin then began to walk away beside Fenrisulfr. The two canids disappeared in two clouds of thick, black smoke. Michael stared at where they had been before turning his attention on Ash.

“You are truly an amazing fur.” The fennec smiled. “This part of your journey is complete. Next, you go home to complete your task. We will send for you when everything has been made ready.” The fennec turned and vanished.

“So, now we wait.” Ash sighed. *Calleigh...*

~END LONG TIME~

Note: The character of Cassandra Archer is portrayed by Vapor and is used with the permission of her creator and owner