

# Identity Crisis

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# Identity Crisis - Arden's Story

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## CONTENTS ACT I

Chapter 1 - Who needs Harry Potter any way?.....	1
Chapter 2 - This ain't no ride in the park. ....	4
Chapter 3 - Did anyone get the license number of that Magic Bus? .....	6
Chapter 4 - We've got to stop running into each other this way.....	8
Chapter 5 - Something strange this way comes.....	12
Chapter 6 - To infinity and beyond.....	16
Chapter 7 - You're the reason I came back .....	22
Chapter 8 - Elementary, my dear Watson. ....	26
Chapter 9 - Bodies in motion.....	30
Chapter 10 - The price of fame .....	35
Chapter 11 - At last we meet again, for the first time.....	39
Chapter 12 - Manic depression or just a bad dream?.....	44
Chapter 13 - You only get one second chance.....	49
Chapter 14 - A new look, a new beginning or a new nightmare?.....	54
Chapter 15 - Excuse me, but aren't you dead? .....	60
Chapter 16 - Guilty until proven innocent .....	64
Chapter 17 - An opportunity missed means more exercise--- .....	68
Chapter 18 - Information is power, but so is electricity .....	71
Chapter 19 - No more Mr. Passive Resistance .....	74
Chapter 20 - A new look for a new look.....	78
Chapter 21 - Make a run for the border .....	82
Chapter 22 - He who hesitates is lost.....	87
Chapter 23 - What once was lost, but now is found .....	98
Chapter 24 - The best laid plans of mice and weasels .....	108
Chapter 25 - And just when we were having a good time too .....	121
Chapter 26 - It's not just a decision matrix, it's your brain .....	131
Chapter 27 - A productive member of the team?.....	143
Chapter 28 - Hostilities remembered, hostilities resumed .....	150
Chapter 29 - Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer .....	160
Chapter 30 - Terminal Frost.....	165
Chapter 31 - A day of reckoning.....	172
Chapter 32 - My destiny, or mission impossible? .....	183
Chapter 33 - There can be no rest for the wicked, or the good guys--- ...	192
Chapter 34 - One betrayal doesn't deserve another,.....	204
Chapter 35 - Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness .....	211
Chapter 36 - Oh my god! They killed Sabrina! You bastards! .....	215
Chapter 37 - Can one challenge fate? .....	219
Chapter 38 - A modest proposal .....	225
Chapter 39 - Rulez is Rulez and yaz don' breaka da rulez.....	232
Chapter 40 - Welcome my friend. Welcome to the machine.....	238
Chapter 41 - A rude awakening .....	244
Chapter 42 - Kill them all and let God sort them out.....	250
Chapter 43 - Never make a deal with a dragon.....	257
Chapter 44 - Live and let die.....	264
Chapter 45 - Would the guilty party please stand up? .....	270
Chapter 46 - Something to remember you by .....	279

# Chapter 1

Who needs Harry Potter any way?

OK... Where to begin?

The Doc said that I should start at the beginning and relate the events as they happened to me. I guess that kind of makes sense. Even now I'm still not sure if this is real, a dream or a nightmare. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Arden, as in the forest over in Germany. When all this started, I was a 38-year-old networking specialist who enjoyed spending his spare time riding his motorcycle, checking out the movies, and reading. Always reading. I stood a solid 6'1", weighed about 350lbs and enjoyed lifting weights. Mind you, I'm not one of these guys that are body builders; I just do it as a casual workout to keep fit. It's hard to work up a good sweat when one's sitting in front of a computer all the time. To round out my face, I wore large, round glasses that helped take a little bit of the chubbiness out of my face. Nice hazel green eyes, and brown crew-cut hair and a full beard rounded out the picture. The only drawback was that I'm an introvert.

Now I'm not shy. Not by any means. But my parents were "IBM" folk. IBM stands for "I've Been Moved" for those of you who just crawled out from under a rock. When I was growing up, IBM moved some of their people around more often than the military. To be honest with you, we moved a lot. You have no idea what kind of a trauma it is for a kid to move into town, actually make some friends, then a year or 2 later, have to pack up and move off, losing all their friends and start over. It tends to work on your brain after about the eighth or ninth time. We moved 17 times in 21 years. Needless to say, I had a very small group of close friends and was not the type to go out "partying" or "bar hopping."

So after the death of "Sparky" Shultz this year, and then my father a few months later from a stroke, I was feeling depressed. Two of the big role models in my life had departed and I was feeling lost.

One of my "new age" friends was constantly pestering me to try new things and push the limits. It was entertaining enough, and learning to meditate was relaxing, but the one thing I never could manage was the 'out of body' experience everyone talked about. You see, I wanted to talk to my spirit guide.

Lisa, the girl that owned The Next Horizon Book Shoppe (sic) was letting me peruse some of the older books on Totemic based religions. I'd done a vision quest when I lived in New Mexico as a kid. My friend Jacky BlackCrow's father was the tribal medicine man (not that anyone in the tribe gave him any respect, including the elders). With his guidance I experienced a vision quest and met up with my Totem. It was a Polar Bear. During the quest the bear told me that some day, we would walk side by side, and I would become one with him. I never understood what he was talking about, and didn't really worry about it.

While I was perusing a book on Totemic rituals and rites, Lisa came over and sat down across from me. Closing the book in front of me she said, "Arden. I know right now is a very difficult time for you and I think I may know a way to help you with your search for

## Chapter 1

an answer. None of the other methods of reaching your spirit guide have worked so far and I thought that I might have something that can help."

At this point she looked rather nervous. Trying to put her at ease I said, "I appreciate the help, but if it's something that you're not comfortable with, please don't feel obligated to show me. I don't want to do anything that we both know could be dangerous or risky."

"I know. That's what makes this all the more difficult." Slowly she pulled out a small box from under the table. "This has been in my possession for a long time. It was given to me by a friend..." As she spoke, she got this wistful look in her eyes. "Someone I knew a lifetime ago."

Placing the box in my hand and quickly pulling away she spoke rapidly. "This is the Amulet of Lakesh. Don't open it here. Don't open it until you feel you must use it. The person who gave this to me warned that it has a power that's not natural. This power can allow someone to cross over, to reach the spirit world and beyond. But it's dangerous. The person who uses it must be willing to give everything up to cross over."

I couldn't believe what she was saying.. Magic amulet? Crossing over? This was bizarre. I didn't really know how to respond.

"Lisa, I appreciate this, but... umm...." I said.

"No. You keep it. I know it's not meant for me. But I have a feeling that you may need it. Please take it. Inside you'll find a paper that gives its history. When you decide that you want to use it, please read the paper closely. Don't touch the amulet till after you've read the paper." Lisa told me.

Quietly she took a deep breath in order to calm down and continued, "If you don't use it, then please keep it safe. Some day you will find someone who may need the amulet. If that time comes then please give them the same warning I gave you. That's all I ask. Please, promise you will do as I say?"

I was still in a bit of a shock. For someone I jokingly referred to as a "new age flake", Lisa was the most down to earth "flake" in the bowl. I was really getting worried about this.

Examining the box it looked like nothing more than an ordinary jewelry box that you would get when you bought a large pendant or necklace. Only thing I noticed was that there was an odd wax seal that covered the front of the box keeping it closed. If nothing else, it would make an interesting addition to my nik-nak shelf.

"Ok hon. I'll think about it, and if I decide to use it, I'll make sure to read the paper inside first. If not, then I'll keep it safe for whoever I feel it should go too in the future. I promise." I told her.

As I looked at her face, I could tell that she was doing her best not to cry. She quickly lowered her head and spoke in a hush whisper, "You've been a good friend. You're a

## Chapter 1

good person. I wouldn't give it to anyone who wasn't. Take care and be safe." And with that she stood quickly and darted to the back room.

I'm not sure how long I sat there looking at that box, and thinking about what Lisa said, and how weird she was acting. In the end I decided that whatever was in the box, it was obviously something important to her. I'd take the box home so that she wouldn't worry. Hopefully in a few weeks, she'd get over whatever is in the box and be willing to talk about it's history. I mean, who believes in magic anyway?

# Chapter 2

This ain't no ride in the park.

Putting the case in a pocket I headed outside. One step out the door reminded me why I liked to hang out in the air-conditioning. Kansas City isn't the most southerly city, and being over 1000 miles from the nearest ocean, you think it would have reasonable humidity. BZZZZZZzzzzzzt Wrong answer. It was a balmy 98 degrees with matching humidity. I went from cool and dry to instant sauna.

Muttering a curse I belted my helmet on and locked the face-bar down while leaving the faceplate open for ventilation. Climbing onto my 78 XS-1100 and kicked it over. As I pulled out onto the interstate heading to the house I cranked up the radio and listed to some classic Floyd on the ride home.

After getting home I was totally exhausted. It's only a twenty-minute ride, but on the interstate that 98 degree weather turns into 105 degrees easy. I emptied my pockets on the table by my keyboard headed back to the bedroom, shucked my clothes and headed into the bathroom for a shower. Still tired from my ride I tossed on some shorts and crawled up on the bed. Turning over towards the nightstand, I placed my glasses on the table next to a picture of my father. Rolling over, I said a silent prayer for him and tried to get some sleep.

\*\*\*\*

Later that evening, sitting in the living room channel surfing, I realized that Pink Floyd was right... There were 99 channels of crap on the TV and nothing on. Disgusted I turned it off and moved over to my Amiga. Now most people wouldn't keep an Amiga in their living room, but this wasn't just any Amiga, it was a video editing machine. I occasionally would take in videos for friends and edit them together. It was nice to be able to display my work on the big TV for folks as I was assembling their clips.

Tonight I wasn't going to be doing any editing. I figured I'd play around with some of the old games I had. Digging through the directories I came across an animation directory and inside were a bunch of animations by Eric Schwartz. I remembered watching them the first time I downloaded them from the internet. The way Amy moved. The characterizations of his Aerotoons , Flip the Frog and Clarissa Cat trying to have some quality time, and of course Sabrina the skunk in her one cartoon.

After viewing the animations, it occurred to me that Eric should have a site on the web somewhere. If not him, some "fan" would have put something up. So I went over to the PC, opened up MegaSlop Explorer, and started searching around. To my surprise, I found that he not only had an official site, he apparently had a cartoon he did monthly. Heading to the archive I clicked on the first cartoon and started reading.

"This is just tooooooo much!" I said to myself. As I continued to surf around I found various archives that contained stories by other people and was totally amazed at the amount of stuff that was out there related to Eric's work.



## Chapter 2

After surfing till almost four in the morning, I decided to get a little sleep. As I got up, I grabbed my empty glass and plate from my snack to dump them in the kitchen on my way to bed. Unfortunately, my stupidity got the better of me. Having recently gotten a laptop, I had just strung a cable from my network hub down the hall, behind the couch, across the floor and up on the table next to my PC. I figured I'd get around to wiring it up right over the weekend. Silly me forgot it was there and gravity took over.

Next thing I knew I was laying face down on the floor, laptop, keyboard and half the contents of my desk scattered around me.

With a curse I got up and started picking things up. First was the laptop. I just paid \$2500 for the thing and I was going to be seriously pissed if it was damaged. Fortunately it looked like the laptop wasn't any worse for wear, but the Ethernet cable had been yanked out of the network card and I could see pins sticking out of it. Not good.

Disgusted with myself, I started throwing other stuff up on the desk. Without thinking about it, I tossed the box that Lisa had given me over towards my tower. It bounced off and landed on the desk. That's the last I bothered to think about it.

Once I cleared up the trash, took one more look around to make sure I didn't miss anything then headed off to bed with visions of Vixens dancing in my head... (ok, if you must know, the Sheila Xm-99 Vixen :)



# Chapter 3

Did anyone get the license number of that Magic Bus?

For the first time in a long time, my dreams were filled with something other than the sight of my father in his deathbed. Although he was still there, my dreams shifted around, bringing forth memories of all I had read that day. The smiling faces of Amy, Sabrina and Sheila were foremost in my mind as I dreamt.

I woke up gasping for breath, tears streaming down my face, as the burning image of Tammy Vixen sitting in front of Tor's gravestone and the image of my father on it's front.

Trying to compose myself, I finally got up and headed to the bathroom. After taking care of "things" I climbed into the shower. Setting the temperature to the point of being nearly scalding, I felt my muscles relax. Slowly the tension started to fade, and the ache in my chest began to subside. Still I was haunted by the vision of Tammy and my father's image on the stone. Sometimes I hate my subconscious.

Towelng off, I ran a quick brush through my crew cut to so it wouldn't dry in a mess and combed out my beard. Satisfied that I didn't look like a total bum, I wrapped the bath towel around me and headed out to the living room. After grabbing a Mt. Dew from the fridge, I sat down and hit the shift key to kill my screen-saver.

Hmm... Looks like my computer didn't find any extra terrestrials last night... Oh well. It's just a screen saver. Not like I'm actually doing anything.

As the backdrop came back up, I got a most vivid reminder that I had made Sheila's Xmas picture my backdrop. "Heh... Love, I'm going to have to change you or I'll never be able to roll my chair up to the desk," I said with a laugh. Lord but Eric can draw. I heard those famous words Jessica Rabbit spoke, "I'm not bad, I'm just drawn that way." I can relate.

About that time I noticed that the case Lisa had given to me was lying next to my tower on the desk. Picking it up, I noticed that the wax seal had split, and broken off. Mentally kicking myself, I picked it up. I must have broken the wax seal when threw the box up on the desk. I was so pissed at having dropped my laptop I didn't even think about the small container.

As I picked it up to examine where the seal had been, the cover slid easily off into my hand. This was NOT my day so far. Committed to checking the thing out, I removed the top from the box. Inside I saw a silver-gray looking amulet. It was large; almost the size of an old silver dollar, in the center was a picture of a face.

## Chapter 3

The face, if one could describe it as that, was disturbing. I could tell that it was supposed to represent a demonic creature. The nose was piggish, and upturned. The grin was surprisingly realistic, as if it knew some inner secret that was most amusing. The teeth were sharp and pointy, with extended eyeteeth. From the forehead extended two horns. I'm not sure if they were supposed to be the traditional "rams horns" or more like those of a Gazelle. The horns extended beyond the inner rim of the coin, and that the shape was not determinate. Where the eyes should be, there were two small gems. At first I thought they might be diamonds, as they appeared clear at first, but had that inner fire that one sees from a quality diamond, though as I continued to look I found I could not determine the color. From one aspect it looked green, another yellow, another red, and others transparent. I had never seen anything like it.

It also felt warm.

Looking in the top of the box I could find no paper that Lisa had described. Thinking I may have dropped it I quickly searched my desk and the floor. Finding no sign of it I once again held up the amulet in my left hand. Looking on the back, in concentric circles were inscribed writing that I could not read. I did not recognize the script. It appeared to have some Cyrillic, Greek and Arabic lettering to it, but the majority was unreadable.

At a loss for what do to, I looked at my computer, the smiling face of Sheila looking back at me. I said "Well Sheila, what do you think? Put it back in the box and re-seal it, or try to find out how it works?"

As I breathed a sigh I chuckled to myself, "I wish you could speak to me love... Lord only knows what you'd tell me."

"DONE!" The word boomed from the air around me. Suddenly the amulet became very warm, and I heard a sinister laughter, which appeared to come from all directions.... And then came the pain.

# Chapter 4

We've got to stop running into each other this way.....

It was a hot day, temperatures almost up in the hundreds. There was supposed to be a pretty heavy thunderstorm moving in this evening, and Zig Zag wanted to beat it. Glancing over at Sheila in the passenger seat she gave herself a little chuckle.

"That kid's too much," she said quietly.

They were just coming back from the Chicago Sexpo 2000 having gone up to act as representatives of ZZ Studios. For three days they had been at the convention, sometimes giving speeches, other times doing signing, and of course, a photo-shoot with the 1st place door prize winners. Needless to say it had been a most productive trip.

"Of course," she thought, "I could have saved a little cash on a room," remembering that Sheila hadn't bothered to come back to the room to do more than a quick shower and clothes change all three days.

Turning on the headlamps so that she could see better, Zig Zag gave a bit of a curse. On the horizon near the town she could see black clouds and lightning. "Damn... not going to beat the rain".

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Sheila woke up as Zig Zag slowed down for traffic.

"Getting close to town boss?" Sheila asked.

"Yep, but it looks like we're not going to beat the rain though," Zig Zag replied with a frown.

As if on cue, thunder and lightning pealed the sky and the rain started to come down. Spotty at first, then a drizzle, then the large drops that can defeat even the best wipers. Growling under her breath, she turned the wipers up on high, slowing down and squinting to see what's going on ahead. Spotting their exit on the outside of town that would take them to Sheila's. She slowed down and got off onto the side road. Being late, there was little if any traffic on this spur, and for that Zig Zag was most grateful.

Huddling down in her seat as more thunder and lightening occurred around them, Sheila muttered, "I really hate lightning!"

Zig Zag looked over at Sheila who was scrunched down in her seat and smiled. "Don't sweat it kiddo. One of the safest places to be in a lightning storm is in a car. The body will conduct the lightning around us on down to the ground through the tires. I saw it on PBS so just relax and enjoy the show." She patted Sheila on the knee to reassure her then turned back to the road.

Just as she looked back ahead, a bolt of lightning struck the pavement about a hundred yards ahead of them. Panicking, Zig Zag slammed on the brakes. In the aftermath of the flash, she thought that she saw something in the road. As she blinked to clear her eyes, light from the headlights illuminated a white object in the road.

## Chapter 4

"Ah Crud!" She exclaimed.

Slamming the wheel over to the right in order to avoid whatever was in the road, Zig Zag forgot all about the rain, and as a result, the car began to spin in the road. With both women hanging onto various parts of the car for dear life, they were both jostled as the car hit something. Now slightly deflected from its original path, the car slid into a ditch and came to a stop.

Gripping the wheel with a death grip, it took a few minutes for Zig Zag to come to her senses. First thing she noticed was that she was wet. Looking around, she saw Sheila was sitting half way on the center console, slumped over. Looking further, she could see that the passenger door was caved in about four or five inches by whatever they had hit.

A low moan escaped Sheila's mouth. Slowly she pushed herself upright, and started to take inventory.

"My God Sheila, you ok?" Zig Zag asked anxiously.

"Uhhh... Yah boss... I think so." Sheila answered. Blinking to clear the rain and some blood from her eyes, she suddenly let out a little yip of pain. "Ouch!"

"What's wrong Sheila, where are you hurt?" Zig Zag asked.

Reaching around to her right side, Sheila began checking her ribs. "I think I may have a couple of ribs cracked Zig." Quickly licking her snout to clear the water, she tasted blood. "Not to mention a cut or two. But I think I'm ok. Did we hit something?"

"Yah. I think so. Let me see about calling you an ambulance first." Zig Zag said. Picking up the cell phone from the console, Zig Zag tried to dial 911, but the phone kept reporting "No Signal".

"Damn. I think whatever we hit took out the antenna for the phone." Zig Zag told Sheila. Looking again, Zig Zag made sure that Sheila wasn't in any immediate trouble. "Ok. Sheila, you stay here. I'm going to go see what we hit, and maybe try to flag someone down."

Climbing out of the car and into the rain, Zig Zag noticed that it was starting to let up a little. Looking around, all she could see was the road, the trees, and rain. There as no sign of a car coming from either direction, nor of whatever they had hit. Sighing to herself she went to the trunk of the car and got out some road flares and a flashlight.

"Might as well not bother with an umbrella. At this stage it won't do me any good," she thought, looking wistfully at the umbrella in the trunk.

Igniting three of the flares, she tossed one up the road a few yards in each direction, and one on the road right next to where the car was in the ditch. Hopefully someone driving by would see the flares and stop to help out.

## Chapter 4

Turning on the flashlight, Zig Zag decided to walk along the side of the road where the car lay in the ditch. Walking against traffic, she swept the light from side to side, looking for whatever they may have hit.

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In the car, Sheila was starting to feel claustrophobic with the car door pushing against her injured ribs. Not getting any satisfaction from the door handle, she slowly crawled across the center console and drivers seat, eventually standing unsteadily in the door.

Leaning on the door of the car, Sheila looked around. The cold rain falling on the hot asphalt was evaporating, creating a low laying mist that clung to the ground. Looking around over the car, she could see Zig Zag walking up the road.

As she stood there, shivering slightly in the lessening rain, Sheila heard something behind her. Turning around, she unconsciously swiveled her ears forward to catch the sound.

There it was again, a low moan that was coming from across the road. Walking unsteadily, Sheila made her way up onto the pavement and across to the others side. Lying partially in the ditch, she saw a large white figure. This was where the moans were coming from.

"ZIG ZAG!!! Over here!!!" She shouted to get Zig Zag's attention. When she saw her coming over, Sheila started down the embankment. Coming next to the figure she could make out what appeared to be an albino bear. As the rain continued to drizzle lightly down, she knelt to examine him. The fog pouring off the road was slowly creeping around him, and she could have sworn that she heard a sizzling sound.

As Zig Zag came up, she shined her flashlight on him. The right side of his head was covered with blood, and there were patches of blood all over him where he had bounced off of the car and pavement. Moaning, he blinked at the light.

Kneeling down by him Sheila put a hand on his shoulder and said, "Don't move. You've been in an accident."

Blinking at her, he squinted. "Sheila?"

Taken aback, Sheila leaned back away from the figure.

"Sheila Vixen? Is that really you?" He asked raising his hand to her.

Glancing at Zig Zag for a second, she reached out for his hand. "Yes, it's really me."

As she took his paw in hers, he grabbed on to her tightly. "Oh man. If this is a dream, it's one hell of a dream."

As his head fell back down to the grass, his grip on her hand released, and slowly fell away. In her hand, Sheila saw a silver looking medallion. The medallion was quite

## Chapter 4

warm in her hand, much warmer than would be reasonable for just being held by someone.

Hearing a car, Zig Zag ran up to the roadway to flag down the vehicle that was coming. Sheila knew this in the back of her mind, but she couldn't take her eyes off of the strange medallion and the man who had just given it to her.

# Chapter 5

Something strange this way comes....

*What have we got?.. White male, unknown species, struck by a car..... What about her?... dono.. Get that stretcher... Immobilize his neck... Good breath sounds... Miss?... BP 140 over 85... Rescue 51 to County General... Miss?.... EKG looks good.... Got a line started... Pupils equal....*

Although she could hear the voices, they didn't quite register on Sheila's consciousness. Still warm in her hand, the amulet held her attention completely. A light touch broke the spell.

"Miss? Are you ok"? A voice asked.

"Ummm... what?" Sheila said, looking up she saw a young ferret lightly touching her left shoulder.

"I said are you ok Miss? Do you need medical attention?" The concerned look in his eyes were highlighted by the numerous flashing blue and red lights. They illuminated the entire area with their rhythmic flashing, beating to a pulse that was regular and irregular at the same time.

The rain had stopped.

"Ummm... I think I've cracked some ribs, and I may have hit my head," she replied slowly, the surreal events around her bathed in a fog of adrenalin and endorphins.

"Stay right here, Miss. Don't move any more than you must. I'll go get the other Ambulance crew." Making sure that she wasn't going to move, the young ferret quickly moved away to get help.

Looking once again at the form laying on the ground, she saw that half a dozen rescue personnel, who were preparing the bear for transport, now surrounded him. Equipment was beeping and chirping, marking the passage of his life. "He's still alive," she thought to herself. "God please let him make it," she said in a silent prayer.

Two more of the rescue team came over to Sheila. In a waking dream she answered their questions as they checked her over. Eventually satisfied that she was in no immediate danger, they put a cervical collar on her, laid her down on a backboard and secured her to prevent any more possible harm then gently lifted her onto a stretcher. As she was being rolled towards the ambulance, Zig Zag came over.

Handing her a purse, Zig Zag said, "Here kiddo. I know you don't like to go anywhere without your things. Are you going to be OK?"

"Sure boss. You know nothing can keep me from work in the morning," replied Sheila.

Smiling bravely, Zig Zag put a hand on hers and said, "Don't worry about it Kiddo. You got the rest of the week off. And don't feel bad, I think I'm going to do the same thing myself."

Chuckling at her boss, "I'll bet \$10 you're at work tomorrow," said Sheila.



## Chapter 5

"You know me too well. Now go with these good looking medics and don't cause too much trouble. I'll be along at the hospital in a little bit. Everything's going to be OK you hear me?" Zig Zag reassured.

"Sure boss." Sheila gave Zig Zag a weak thumbs up, "Everything's 100%".

Bending over to give her a quick peck on the cheek, Zig Zag then backed off so the medics could load her into the ambulance. A tear slowly trickled down her eye as she watched it pull away.

\*\*\*\*\*

As I slowly became aware of my surroundings, I discovered that I was in a hospital room. Looking to either side I could see monitoring equipment registering my pulse, blood pressure and oxygen level. There were IV's in my left arm, and my right arm was immobilized on my chest. My right leg was suspended from a traction pulley and in a cast almost up to my hip. I could also see out of both eyes, though everything was fuzzy.

"Damn... no glasses. I'll have to ask if someone knows where they are." I muttered.

Lying there for a while, I took inventory of what I remembered.

I had been sitting at my computer looking at the amulet and had said something to the picture of Sheila Vixen on my screen. Next thing I know I'm on fire, Ever cell in my body is screaming bloody murder, then a loud flash, a bang, and I'm suddenly on my left knee in the rain. Gasping for breath, I saw a flash of light to my right.

Looking I saw headlights coming at me.

No, they were turning.

No, they were spinning.

At that point I heard the door open to the room. Turning my head (and regretting it immediately) I saw a large dog walk in. At least I think it was a dog. Biggest damned Schnauzer I ever saw, wearing hospital blues and a stethoscope. He walked over towards my bed carrying a clipboard.

"Hmmm. Ya. Interesting. Ahhh... Good." Looking up at me, I could see his large round eyes. Smiling he finished approaching me and ask "Vell mine young friend. How are ve feelink today?"

This is perfect. A walking, talking Schnauzer with a German accent, this can only get better.

"I'm alive. At least I think I'm alive. That or this is one seriously bad nightmare." I answered.

"Vell mine heir, I'm afraid zat it ist not a nightmare. You vere ztrukh by unt automobile on ze highway. Fortunately for you, ze car vaz not build kvite as vell as you

## Chapter 5

vere. Ven ve first zaw you, I vaz zertain zat you ver goink to have zome zeriouz brain trauma, but it zeems zat you have quite ze zick schkull."

*(Typing this in the way I remember this guy saying it is a pain. Let's just remember he has a REAL heavy accent and leave it like that eh? )*

"Was anyone else hurt?" I asked.

"There was a young lady, who was injured. We're keeping her under observation for a few days. She should be ok. How do you feel, my boy?" The Dr. asked.

"I feel like I've been hit by a car. But I suppose you know that. Did anyone bring in a pair of glasses with them?" I asked. Hope springs eternal.

"I'm afraid not. Do you remember what happened?" He asked.

At this point it suddenly occurred to me that if I told this guy what REALLY happened, I'd wind up in a padded room up in the psycho ward.

"No... It's all a blur. I remember the ambulance a little. Some of the time in the ER, but nothing before that." I answered.

"Ach... That's likely an effect of the head trauma. You've had a minor concussion. Don't worry about it though. Temporary memory loss is to be expected with this kind of injury. In time, it will come back to you. Just relax and don't push yourself." He told me.

At this point the doctor looked nervous, "I need to ask you a few questions that aren't directly related to your injuries." He said.

"Sure doc. Fire away." I replied.

"When you were found, you were naked. Do you remember why?" He asked.

Whoah doggie... I've dreamed about getting stuck out in the middle of nowhere naked, but this is too much.

"Umm... Sorry. Like I said, I don't remember anything at all." I told him.

Disappointed he asked, "Do you walk much? Or do you lead a very sedentary life?"

HUH? What's this one about. "I'm not sure what you're asking. Why do you ask?" I asked.

Definitely nervous he pulled up a chair, "To be honest, my boy, you're an anachronism. You have no calluses on your front or rear paws. Your left forepaw has a strange mark, almost like a brand. The skin around it appears to be pink, as if freshly healed. And your fur, it has NEVER been cut. The follicles are naturally terminated. There's no way you could exist in society without having gotten a trim unless you were a throwback in the wilds. There's no place for one of your specific genus anywhere within a thousand miles from here. Even then, you should have calluses on your feet. So the burning question is:

## Chapter 5

How did you get to be where you were, without ever showing any signs of having existed before you were hit?"

Fur? Looking down at myself it finally dawned on me that I wasn't just seeing gauze everywhere, but fur. Looking at my hand, I could see that along with fingers, I also had sharp, black claws. Focusing closer to my face I could see a snout rather than my nose. "*Oh boy.*" I said to myself.

My mind was racing a thousand miles a second trying to find a way out of it. Lifting up my left hand to rub my eyes I spied the mark he spoke of. It was an impression of the amulet, the Demon's laughing face burned into my skin in full detail. Even the intricate text on the outer edge was rendered.

Holding my hand up to the doctor I took the plunge, "See this emblem doc? It's the key to it all. I can't say why, or how, but all I know is that whatever did THIS to me is responsible for me being on the road."

Ok... So it wasn't entirely the truth, but it wasn't quite a lie either.

Nodding he bent closer, "You watch the history show? You know that Der Furer was studying the occult before the war. He was interested in every form of black magic. I once saw that symbol. It was at the university where I was studying medicine. We were required to take a science class that was not related to medicine. It was supposed to broaden our horizon. I took archaeology. One day a Gestapo man came to see my professor. He showed him that emblem and asked him to do research on its background. We never found out much about the object. Three days later, the professor disappeared without a trace. The Gestapo was furious, but they never found him."

Straightening in his chair he continued, "I will keep your secret for now, my boy, to prove that you can trust me. But some day, you must promise to tell me what you know. I *must* know, what happened to the professor!" The look in his eyes at this point was disturbing. It was almost fanaticism.

"What was so important about this professor?" I asked. What was this guy looking for.

Standing he straightened his scrubs and picked up the chart. "He was my father." And with that he turned and left the room.

After he left, I held my hand up again, looking at that grinning face. I could still hear the bastard laughing at me in the back of my mind.

# Chapter 6

To infinity and beyond....

Trying to find a comfortable way to rest, I reviewed the events of the last day or so. Either I was certifiably crazy, and probably doped up in a small padded cell even as I think I'm typing this, or somehow that amulet had transported me to an alternate reality, one where animals walked and talked.

I felt like I was in a bad movie.

Relaxing, tried to get some rest. Not able to fall asleep, I decided to try some meditation. That might help me get a little insight on what was going on. Regulating my breathing, I concentrated on clearing my mind and turning my sight inward, seeking my spirit guide.

I awoke feeling refreshed. Somehow I had fallen asleep while meditating. It wasn't the first time for that to happen so I wasn't too surprised. It wasn't until I took a deep breath that I smelled the grass and flowers. Waking up a little more I became aware of a breeze and the sound of leaves blowing in the wind along with the chirping of birds.

Opening my eyes I saw that I wasn't in a hospital, but laying in a small glade. As I sat up I realized that although I still hurt, I could move freely. Looking around, I saw a small hut built on a wood frame with skin hides stretched over it. Coming from a hole in the top was a small column of smoke. I smelled fresh baked bread.

As I approached the hut I realized that I still wasn't entirely myself. I was still covered with fur. Looking around I spotted a small pond with a stream running through it. I walked over and looked down into the water.

It was not me looking back. Not as I remembered myself. I looked like some parody of a polar bear drawn to human proportions. I now understood why I had such a hard time speaking, since my mouth was no longer shaped the same.

I experimented with my tongue, seeing how versatile it was. I could reach it out almost far enough to lick my eyebrows. Smiling to myself I thought, "In my old world, I would have been MOST popular." It was along that line of thought it occurred to me to check out other attributes. Raising an eyebrow I was rather impressed. Then it occurred that in this world, I could be runt. As Mr. Spock was fond of saying, "There are always possibilities".

Standing I proceeded over to the hut. As I approached, the door swung open before I touched it, bringing with it an intense feeling of familiarity and of being at home. As I entered I saw a table with two chairs, a fresh loaf of unleavened bread, two wooden cups and an adobe pitcher. I sat down at the table and waited. I knew there should be someone. The bread was familiar, but I couldn't quite place it. It reminded me of something....

"It reminds you of your last visit child." A female voice said.

## Chapter 6

Turning I saw a tall female bear. She was formed similar to the way that I was, human, but still clearly animal. Smiling, she walked over to the other side of the table and sat down.

"The last time you sat here, and ate my bread was on your vision quest, do you remember my son?" She asked.

It hit me bolt of lightning, all my memories of the quest flooded back into me. "Nanuk, how did I get here?" I asked.

"Child, don't you remember meditating in the hospital?" Nanuk asked me.

I quickly looked down at my left hand, now a paw. It was bare.

"I will not allow the mark of one such as that in my domain child. You are free of him while you are here." She told me.

"Nanuk, what is happening to me? What have I become?" I asked.

"I told you on your first quest, that one day you would take a journey, and that journey would allow you and I to become one. You have now embarked upon that journey." Nanuk answered.

Stunned, I couldn't believe it. I remember her saying it, but I just assumed it would be some ritual. I had no idea until now, what she had meant.

"Will I ever be able to get home?" I asked her.

"I can not answer that. You will have the chance to go home. The choice will be up to you, but it will come with a heavy price." She told. She then broke the bread in half, placing one half on my plate. Then she filled the mug in front of me..

"Eat now my child. You are injured and we must make you well. Your journey awaits." Nanuk said.

Taking a bite of the bread, my mouth was filled with the flavors of grains, honey, meats and berries. Each bite tasted different and yet the same. The drink was a wine that washed my fears away. When I finished she took me by the arm and led me to a small cot.

"Now my child, you must sleep. Let Nanuk sing to you and heal you, for you will need your strength in the coming days." She began to sing.

When I lay back on the bed, my nose was filled with the smell of fresh flowers. As she began to sing to me, I recognized the song as one she sang to me the last time I had come. Listening to her song, the ache in my bones faded, and my muscles relaxed until finally I fell asleep.

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## Chapter 6

I woke with a start. Had it been a dream? Was it real? Looking down at myself I could see that I was still covered with fur, and my hand still marked. It wasn't a dream.

As I lay there, I realized that the pain had faded. My ribs were but a dull ache, rather than the sharp stabbing pain and my shoulder didn't throb. Flexing the muscles in my leg brought a dull throb to it, but nothing like what I was feeling before. Nanuk had sung her song to heal me, and this time I remembered it.

Looking out the window, I realized that it was morning. The way the shadows had fallen, I figured that it must be about nine or ten in the morning. They must have decided to let me sleep.

As I lay there resting, the nurse came in. "And how are we this morning?" She asked.

She was cute, for a rabbit. As she came over I tried to squint, so as to get a better look at her. It was difficult.

"Not bad. I sure slept well last night. I definitely feel ten thousand percent better than I did yesterday." I told her.

Taking my left paw and referring to her watch, she took my pulse, and then using a digital thermometer, my temperature. Checking under some of my bandages she got a most curious look on her face.

"When I saw the write up on your condition, I thought you're abrasions were worse than this." She told me. Placing new bandages on my arms, backs and legs, she then told me that someone would be in presently with my breakfast.

From the rumbling coming from my stomach, I couldn't object to that, even if it *was* hospital food.

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Later that afternoon, I was sitting up trying to read a magazine. Being short sighted, and one arm short, it was a little hard to hold the magazine up and try to read it. As I was giving my arm a rest, I heard someone talking outside the open door.

"Excuse me, is this the room with the bear that was hit last night?" The voice was a female, definitely one that had the sound of being professionally trained.

"Ah, yes it is. Do you know him?" That would be Herr Doktor speaking.

"Um, no. You see, I'm the one who hit him yesterday." She sounded apologetic. Glad to know whoever hit me didn't enjoy it.

"I see. Yes, this is his room, would you like to speak with him?" The doctor asked my guest.

"Was he hurt bad? Last night when I left, they were taking him up to surgery." She said. Wow. She actually sounded concerned for me.

## Chapter 6

"Do not worry about that. His leg was broken by the impact, and he had a dislocated shoulder. They took him to surgery to set his leg properly in case a pin was required, that's all. I spoke with him earlier this morning when he woke up. He will be fine." Answered the doctor.

"You have no idea how much of a relief that is. It was traumatic enough just getting in a car wreck, but to find out that I had hit someone..." She trailed off. Now I was really hurting for this chick. My appearance had caused an accident. I wondered if she was the one who was injured.

"I think you will find that he holds no grudge against you. Please, I am about to check in on him, would you care to join me?" The doctor asked her.

"If you're sure it would be ok, then yes, I'd like that." She told him. Bingo.

I watched the door as they entered. The doctor in the lead, and a tall black and white tiger striped cat following. As they came closer the doctor smiled at me. "How is my favorite patient today?" He asked me.

"I'm feeling a lot better today doc. I don't know if you guys gave me something last night, but I slept like a rock, and I sure feel a lot better." I told him. As my brother always said, shovel it heavy and deep.

"We gave you nothing last night. It was your body's natural healing mechanism. Your species tends to enter a hibernation state when they need to heal. Frankly I'm surprised you're awake now." He said to me. While speaking, he had been checking under the bandages that the nurses had replaced. With each one, his brow would furrow for a second and he would glance at me.

"Well my boy, it looks like you're healing up much better than I had expected. We shall have to discuss your progress some other time. Right now I have a surprise for you, you have a visitor." He announced.

Moving to the side, he motioned the tigress to move forward. Squinting, I finally got a decent look at her and realized it wasn't a tiger, but none other than Zig Zag.

Now I must admit that I had gotten used to dogs, cats and rabbits coming around, but to have Zig Zag show up.... I just about passed out.

"Are you ok?" She asked. She put her hand down on mine. Proof that she was real.

"Ya. Sorry, I just never expected to meet up with you." I told her.

"I get that from a lot of men." Zig Zag said with a chuckle. The doctor's ears perked up a little bit at that. It occurred to me that he didn't know who she was.

Smiling, I quipped, "That's an understatement." I could see that Zig Zag was still uncomfortable. She was clutching her handbag in front of her with both hands.

## Chapter 6

"Look, I'm sorry about what happened. I don't remember how I got there, and I know you would have done your best to avoid me. I want you to realize that I don't hold anything against you." I told her reassuringly.

A look of relief came over Zig Zag's face, "You have no idea how glad I am to hear that. My lawyer tried to talk me out of coming to see you, but I just had to know that you were going to be alright." She said.

Smiling, I replied, "Please. Don't worry about me. I'm very resilient. Would you like some water, maybe a chair? I hate to make a lady stand."

An honest smile broke her face, "A true gentleman." She said wryly. I scooted my good leg over to make space for her and gestured for her to sit down. Sitting down she looked a little more relaxed.

Putting the back of my bed up a little more vertical, I explained, "You'll pardon me, but I lost my glasses in the accident, and I'm near sighted. It's hard to see you from the other end of the bed when it's down like that."

Her eyes got wide and she opened up her purse. After digging around for a few seconds she pulled out a pair of glasses. "Are these yours?" She asked me.

Taking them from her I tried to put them on. Mind you, it's hard to put on glasses when you're used to your ears being at the side of your head, and not high up. After a couple of false tries, she leaned over and with both hands settled them firmly on my head.

Looking around I could finally see everything in focus. "Where did you find them?" I asked.

"While I was unloading my car this morning, I found those sitting in the back seat. Apparently when we hit you, they came in through the broken window." She said.

"Thank you. You've given me back my sight. Who knows how long it would have taken for me to get them replaced." I told her.

At this point the doctor intruded, "I must beg your pardon my boy, but I must check up on my other patients. You appear to be doing well. I will check in with you later. Goodbye madam." He said to Zig Zag, and with that he left.

His mention of other patients reminded me of something he told me last night.

"Zig, the Doc said that someone else was hurt. Who was it and how bad?" I asked her.

Her head bowed for a few seconds and then she quietly spoke, "It was one of my employees, Sheila Vixen. When you struck the door, it caved in. She's got some cracked ribs and concussion." While she was saying this, I watched her slowly turn a lace handkerchief into a small chunk of rope. I could see that she felt responsible.



## Chapter 6

Leaning forward I put a hand on her knee. Startled she looked up at me. "It wasn't your fault. You hold no blame. From what you describe, she's going to be all right. Do everyone a favor and don't beat your self up over it." I told her.

As I leaned back, she put her head back down and held very still. "I can still see it," she began quietly, "there was a flash of lightning, then all I saw was you in the middle of the road. It looked like you were on fire, then we were spinning out of control." At this point she put the handkerchief to her face and quietly began to cry.

Quietly I spoke, "As the car spun around, it struck something as the passenger side was beginning to come parallel, you felt it as a heavy thump. Terror gripped you as your car skidded off into the ditch, you both were stunned by the impact. When you realized you were alive, your first thought was to check your passenger. Your relief that she was alive was only temporary, as she was hurt. Then you looked for whatever you had hit. To your horror it wasn't some miscellaneous object that had fallen off of a truck, it was a person. The rest of the night was a waking dream, or nightmare. Every time you close your eyes, you relive it. It's an event that will haunt you forever."

Slowly she looked up at me. "How do you know all this?" She asked me.

"You have no idea how lucky you are." I said. As I put my head back on the pillow, trying to stop the rush of emotions, "The person you hit survived."

In the back of my mind, I could hear that little bastard laughing at me again....

# Chapter 7

You're the reason I came back.

They were back in the car, driving down that rain slickened road. Once again Sheila was hunched down in her seat, cringing with each bolt of lightning to split the night. Looking out the front window, she could see the bolt of lightning approach the road in slow motion. As it struck the ground, there was a flash as the lighting scattered across the road in a spider web pattern. As the image faded, she could see him, kneeling in the road where the lightning had just struck, bathed in a strange fire. As she watched, the car began to spin, the view outside whirling in a montage of trees, illuminated by the front headlamps.

Suddenly she was walking across the road again. The mist was rolling across the ground, like waves lapping across a pond, clinging to her feet as she shuffled across the warm asphalt. Slowly she walked down the embankment to look at the stranger lying in the grass.

Once again, he handed her the strange amulet. Standing up she let it dangle from her hand. Spinning, it gave off an eerie glow. There was another flash of light, and now she was standing in a strange house. The walls were made of simple wood, and rough in nature. The floor was planked wood, with a simple throw rug in the middle. As she turned, she saw a rocking chair, a bed, and finally a mirror.

Approaching the mirror, Sheila saw herself for the first time. She was standing in a peasant dress with sandals on. It was then that she noticed her face, it was all wrong. There was no fur, and her snout! It was gone! Replaced by a small protruding nose and flat mouth, similar to that of some monkeys, but still wrong. There was no fur, except for her shockingly red mane on top of her head, tumbling down her back and over her shoulders. In horror she looked at her paws and again saw no fur, but instead she saw delicate fingers, with short, rounded fingernails. Looking into the mirror again she opened her mouth and screamed to the sound of a menacing laugh.

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Sitting up in bed quickly, she grabbed her ribs and lay back down. The dream had been so real that she could almost believe it had happened. Turning on the light over her bed, she took her handbag out of the stand next to her and withdrew a mirror. Examining her reflection in the looking glass, she breathed a sigh of relief. It had been just a dream. Replacing the mirror, she looked into the bag again, and withdrew the amulet. Looking at it she studied the face again. It was as familiar to her as her own face in it's own grotesque way. Once again she wondered just what was so damned funny.

On the back, she once again traced the symbols with a claw, wondering what they could mean. Putting the amulet back in the bag, she tucked it safely away in the stand for safekeeping.

Turning off the light, she leaned back in bed, remembering the dream. What was it supposed to symbolize? How was this medallion and the stranger they had hit related? With these questions rolling around in her head, she closed her eyes and tried to get some sleep, all while that laughing voice was rolling around in the back of her head.

## Chapter 7

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After Zig Zag got herself together, she gave me a quick hug and a kiss before she left to go check up on Sheila.

"Young feller me lad, if you're going to be stuck in a dream world, this is one heck of a dream world to be stuck in." I said to myself.

Laying there, enjoying the ability to see again, and the smell Zig Zag left behind on my fur, I began to like being this new me. So there was a little pain involved, but there is pain with any new birth.

Eventually the doctor came back.

"Well my boy, I see you are no worse for the wear from your guest. I take it you know her from somewhere?" He asked, pulling up a chair, he sat down next to my bed.

"Well doc, ever heard of Zig Zag?" I asked him.

His eyes widened as he realized whom I was talking about.

"Yep. That was her, in the flesh....err... fur as it were." I told him, grinning like the cat that ate the canary.

"So your memory isn't as bad as you wanted to let on this morning eh?" He said slyly.

I had been thinking about what he said this morning. He had me dead to rights. If I was going to trust anyone, I might as well start with this guy.

"For you, yes. There's no way I could ever explain what happened to me and be believed by anyone else, and I think you know that." I said to him.

Leaning closer he spoke lowly, "So tell me how you came to be here."

Sitting back I related the events that led up to my to my appearance on the road. As I finished up my story he leaned back in his chair and thoughtfully stroked his chin.

"And your rapid healing, this is also because of the amulet?" He asked.

"I don't think so. Since I no longer have the amulet, I don't see how it could be helping with that". I answered. Looking at my hand I added, "Unless this brand counts."

Furrowing his brows the doctor thought about what I had said. "I doubt the mark would do it, although it is possible. Later I will want to take photographs of the image. Maybe we will be able to find more out about this amulet. But wait, you said that you no longer have the amulet. Do you know where it went? He queried me.

Thinking back, I couldn't get a clear picture. "I don't know. I could have dropped it when I was hit, or maybe over in the ditch where I landed. Hell, it could have dropped in the ambulance or the ER." I replied. Aggravated, I banged my head against the pillow. Fortunately it wasn't a hard one. "The damned thing could be anywhere. I don't even know if I had it with me when I appeared." I said.

## Chapter 7

Frowning the doctor let out a sigh of disappointment and lowered his head, "So there goes my chance at possibly finding what happened to my father."

I could understand what this guy was feeling. The loss of my father had been part of what had led me to the amulet in the first place. "Look doc, I can understand what your feeling, but wouldn't your dad be dead by now?" I asked.

As he glanced up, I continued, "I don't mean to be insensitive, but it's been almost fifty years since your dad vanished. He would have to be over a hundred if he was still alive!"

Smiling a little, as if to a private joke he finally replied, "How old did you say you were, my boy?"

Huh? "I didn't, but I'm thirty eight." I answered thoughtfully.

Still smiling he cocked his head to the side, "I thought so. Somehow, I couldn't see someone in their early twenties seeking out such an object."

Now he had me confused. "What are you talking about? Early twenties?" I demanded.

Nodding, "Ya. Early twenties. When you were brought into the ER, they had no idea how old you were. One of our male nurses who is a Kodiak checked you over and estimated your age to be in the late teens or early twenties." He answered.

He let that sink in for a while then continued, "So you see. If what happened to you, also happened to my father, than he would now be about the same age that I am, no? So you can you can understand my desire."

"Yah doc. I see what you're saying. And I'll help you find a way to track him down if possible." I told him. That nasty little subconscious of mine pointed out that if the person who used the amulet became twenty when they appeared in their new world, then this could be a veritable fountain of youth.

No wonder Lisa was talking about someone giving it to her a lifetime ago!

He stood up and put the chair away, "Thank you. Now if you don't mind, I must be going. Oh yes, we're going to be moving you out of Critical Care tomorrow. I see no reason to keep you up here when you are improving so well."

"Glad to hear it. I said. "Any idea when I might be able to get up and move around?" I asked. Hope springs eternal.

Laughing for a second, he finally answered, "My boy, you were hit by a car less than twenty four hours ago. It's a miracle that you are being moved out of ICU already. I wouldn't worry about getting up and around. In a few days, we shall see."

As he turned to leave, I remembered what Zig Zag had said about Sheila. "Hey Doc, one more question. Do you know about a patient named Sheila Vixen?" I asked.

Turning to face me, "Yes, she's employed by that lovely lady that visited you today." He told me.

## Chapter 7

"Do you know how she is? Zig Zag said that she had been hurt in the accident." I queried. I'd come across realities to meet this chick. I wanted to make sure I wasn't going to lose her.

Seeing the look on my face he chuckled, "She will be fine. She cracked a couple of ribs, and had a small bump on the head. Nothing to worry about at all."

Feeling a weight lift from my shoulders I laid back. "Thanks doc. I just needed to make sure."

After a while I looked at the face in the palm of my hand.

It was my turn to laugh.

# Chapter 8

Elementary, my dear Watson.

As I slowly woke up in the morning, I could still hear Nanuk's song running through my head. I had slept the entire night for a change. The first time in a long time, I was not haunted by the image of my father.

With a little fumbling, I managed to get my glasses on and look at the clock. It was almost seven A.M. Reaching over to the bed rail, I turned on the TV. I figured I'd catch some of the morning news.

As I lay there watching TV, that cute Rabbit came in. "Ohhh. We've found our glasses, didn't we?" She asked.

Why do they always talk in the third person?

"I'm here to prep you for your move. I just need to unplug some tubing from you, and we'll be all ready to get you headed downstairs." She informed me.

"No sweat. I'm at your disposal." I answered, happy to be moving out of this room.

Smiling, she pulled the covers back. At this point, I realized that I wasn't even wearing one of those stupid hospital gowns. What was even more disturbing, was where she was unplugging the first tube.

Needless to say, I suddenly realized why I hadn't felt the urge to take a whiz in two days.

Laying my head back down, trying my best to think of something other than what she was doing, she finally rolled the covers back over me. "All done champ." She said. Looking down, I noticed the definite lack of a tent. Chalk one up for the good guys.

"Whew, I wasn't even aware that was there." I admitted sheepishly.

"Don't worry about it. Once it's in place, I'm told that you rarely feel it afterwards." She told me, then she flashed me that smile again.

Pretty soon, she proceeded to remove the IV's that had been plugged into my left arm. Finally able to stretch it without any restriction, I gave it a good, tendon-popping stretch. "Oh yah. That's much better. When does the straight jacket come off?" I asked.

Changing my bandages again, she paused. "The way you're healing, I wouldn't be surprised if they took it off today." She answered.

Giving me a brow furrowed look, she continued to change the rest of my bandages.

"Hey, can I help it if I'm quick healer? I figured you'd be happy to see me getting well." I said. I put on my best puppy dog look. At least as good a puppy dog look you can accomplish with a bear face.

## Chapter 8

Chuckling, she licked a finger and drew a line in the air. "Ok. Chalk one up for the visiting team. All done." She said, then gave me that patented smile again, and headed out with the dirty linen and bandages.

As she left, a pair of suits walked in. My first impression were that they were some kind of corporate goon squad from the hospital, come to talk to me about my bill. My second look determined that although they were dressed in suits, they weren't good suits. They were the kind that you get off the rack at Sears.

They had COP stamped all over them.

The first one was a small Basset Hound, his floppy ears dangling onto his collar. He grabbed the chair, and swung it around so that the back was towards me, he straddled the chair resting his arms on its back. Reaching into his jacket, he pulled out a notepad and a pen.

His cohort, a tall Doberman Pincer, just leaned against the wall. He had the classic "Hans and Franz" build, and was wearing a scowl on his face that would curdle milk.

The Hound spoke, "Howdy. My name is Officer Smith, and my partner back there, is Officer Jones. I hope you don't mind if we ask you a few questions about the accident the other night?" Smith and Jones? Sounds more like a couple of feds than it would local cops.

OK. Time to turn my IQ down to room level. "Sure, officers. I'd be glad to help in anyway I can, but I'm still having trouble with my memory." I told them.

Nodding, "Yah, we had a little talk with the doctor. Quite a blow to the head you took. He says it's a miracle you're even awake. I was hoping you'd be able to tell me what you can remember." The first officer said to me.

"Not much to tell really." I said, continuing, "I remember waking up in the ambulance for a few seconds. There are bits and pieces of the ER and being rolled down the hallway, and that's about it until I woke up yesterday evening."

Making notes in his book, Smith nodded, "And you have no memories of anything before the accident?" He asked.

Making a little show of looking at the roof, like I was trying to remember things. I answered, "I remember sitting at a computer. I think it was in my living room, because I could see a large TV behind it. I remember riding a motorcycle down a country road, watching airplanes take off and land from the end of a runway... But it all makes no sense. I can't get a grip on it."

Time to get dramatic. I started banging my good hand on my forehead, "None of it makes sense. It's all just flashes of images. I can hear a voice, but I don't know who it is, or what their name is and I KNOW I should be able remember it!"

## Chapter 8

Officer Smith straightened up a little in the chair, "Whoa there, partner. Take it easy. The doc says it will come back to you eventually. These things take time." A derisive snort from Jones confirmed the "Good Cop/Bad Cop" team.

Laying my head back on the pillow I closed my eyes. "I know, but it doesn't help. I go to sleep wondering who I am. I wake up wondering if I have a history. All I know is that apparently one of the paramedics said I told him my name was 'Arden.' That's not much to go on, you know?" I told them.

Once again I tried to use the "puppy dog" look, this time going for the "haunted" look. It worked on the Nurse. Maybe it will work on this cop.

I could see Jones rolling his eyes. Smith on the other hand just nodded. "Don't worry about it." Flipping a couple pages back he continued, "I understand you met the woman who hit you?"

Guilty as charged. "Yah, she came around here yesterday. She was worried about me. Nice to know that there are people who would actually care about someone they know nothing about." I said quietly.

Nodding, Smith again made a note, "Do you remember her name?" He asked.

Thinking for a second, "Ummm...Sheila?...No, that was the other one, the one they said got hurt. Umm...Zippy, Ziggy, Zig, no Zig Zag, that's it. Zig Zag." I told him.

Writing again, "And have you ever seen this Zig Zag before?" Smith asked.

Do bears crap in the woods? "She looked familiar. At first I thought she was a movie star, but she just giggled when I asked her. Why, is she famous or something?" I asked, innocently.

That got Jones good. He cracked up. It's hard to keep a straight face when someone drops a line like that. Even Smith had his mouth covered.

"What? What!" I asked, giving them my most innocent, 'What did I say?' look.

Getting a little control, Smith cleared his throat. "Ahem, you could say that. She specialized in the non-mainstream film market." He told me.

Some times the gods are kind to fools, "Oh. She makes art films! Ahhh. No wonder I don't remember her. I don't go to 'artsy' theaters. I prefer a good action flick." I said, innocently.

Jones actually turned and ducked out of the room, I heard him lose it in the hall just as the door was closing. Smith on the other hand, was a little better of an actor.

"I agree. If it's not Hollywood, it's not worth it." He said. That man should get the silver star, he fought that smile hard! Standing up, he set the chair back against the wall, and said, "I think I have everything I need for now. Here's my card. If you remember



## Chapter 8

anything of importance, or think of something that we can do to help you, please give me a call."

Handing me his card, he smiled and walked towards the door, as it was closing behind him I saw him pause, then both of them lost it again.

As I heard their laughter fade into the distance, I allowed myself a chuckle of satisfaction. Yep, things were definitely looking up this morning.

# Chapter 9

Bodies in motion....

Waiting on the nurse to come back and move me, I turned up the volume on the TV. They were babbling about some traffic accident at the I675/I75 interchange. Looks like yet another small car overestimated the stopping power of a Mack Truck.

As I relaxed, I continued to chuckle at the Keystone Kops that had dropped by. I'm sure they were nice guys, but I hadn't had better marks in a long time. In fact, I hadn't had such an easy shot since my brother's bachelor's.....

Just then, I saw Zig Zag's picture on the TV. Turning up the volume I listened in.

"...nday evening, when controversial 'Blue Film' actress, Zig Zag was reported to be in a single vehicle accident having struck a pedestrian. Sources at the hospital report that the as of yet to be identified 'John Doe' has been upgraded from critical condition, to simply serious." The backdrop changed to a video of the night of the accident. The commentary continued, "While driving South on State Road 49, Zig Zag managed to lose control of her vehicle on the wet pavement, striking an innocent bystander."

Now the video cut to Zig Zag, standing in the drizzle, looking like a wet cat. "Police have not commented on exactly how or why she lost control of her vehicle." Video cuts to the car being towed out of the ditch, zooming in on the door. "According to sources, the John Doe caused these damages when the vehicle stuck him at high speed."

Cutting back to the studio, the camera cuts back to show both of the hosts. The commentator, a female Mink, and her co-host, a male Raccoon, began chatting about the story.

Female: "It's a shame that it takes some nameless victim as we have seen in this story," flash up a picture of me taken in the ER, "to demonstrate the dangers of drivers who so callously disregard the driving conditions."

Male: "Indeed it is Janet. If people would only think twice before racing around on back roads."

Hearing enough of this tripe, I turned off the TV. I was steamed. Had I been a lobster, they would have been rolling in the drawn butter. As soon as I could, I'd get a hold of Zig Zag and get her to setup a press interview for me. I wasn't gonna let some overgrown fur coat get away with the crap she was espousing.

That thought brought me up short. I was going to have to keep my colloquialisms to myself. Terms such as "rug rat" and "lap dog" may not quite have the same connotation here as they did at home. And certainly referring to a Mink as a "walking fur coat" would probably get me ten to twenty in the pen, or pound, or whatever they use here.

Damn, I don't even know Zig Zag's number! I suppose I could try and track her down through the studio. Shaking my head I tried to relax. Getting myself worked up into knots wasn't going to help either of us.

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## Chapter 9

Shortly before noon, the doctor came in with a small package. As he unfolded it, I realized that it was a large hospital gown. "Property of County General Hospital," was stamped on it.

"You will want to put that on before the orderlies come to help you move." He explained, handing it to me.

"Hey doc, hard to do with only one wing. My shoulder doesn't even hurt anymore, how about cutting me lose of this straight jacket?" I asked.

Adjusting the bed so that it was almost vertical, the doctor came around the bed to my right side and began undoing the straps. "Normally we like to leave these on for a week or so, however as fast as you have been healing, I'm willing to try taking it off early. If we leave it off, you must promise to put it in a sling until I say you are healed, ok?" He said to me sternly.

"You got it doc. Anything, as long as I can scratch my ribs!" I answered happily.

Chuckling, he removed the last of the straps. As he moved my arm away from my chest, there was a little twinge of pain in my shoulder, however that passed quickly. After taking the appliance away, he slowly flexed my arm, and shoulder, watching my face for signs of pain.

Seeing me wince a few times, he nodded and said, "Ahhh, you see my boy? You are not entirely healed. I will go get a sling for your arm, till then, just try not to use it. Okay?"

Conceding defeat, I nodded. "Okay, doc. You got it. I won't be doing any pushups or handstands until you say so."

He then moved down to the cast on my leg. Rapping on it with his knuckles, he watched me. Seeing that I didn't wince he started to let the leg down. Blood, now no longer denied an easy path due to gravity, quickly announced it' presence to my shin. The throbbing was back and with a vengeance.

As I sat taking deep breaths to try to control the throbbing a bit, I heard the doctor chuckle. "Throbs a bit, does it eh? Not as quick healer down here either, though you are still quicker than most. Just relax and the throbbing will pass. If you need it, I will get you some pain medicine."

As the throbbing slowly started to fade, I opened my eyes. He was still looking closely at me. "It's OK doc. Pain is useful. Tells us when we've really screwed the poo... err... screwed up." I told him. Lord only knows how 'screwing the pooch' would go over here, I continued, "The throbbing is starting to fade. I think I'll be alright."

Nevertheless, he took my pulse to verify that it wasn't too elevated. Then excusing himself, he headed out the door, presumably to get a sling.

Throwing back the covers, I carefully began to put the gown on over my right arm. It was indeed stiff and sore, but presently I got it on. Realizing that I couldn't tie it in the

## Chapter 9

back, I just settled on draping it over my shoulders. I'd get the next nurse or orderly that came by to tie it down.

As I sat there, I got a sensation that wasn't at all unfamiliar. The one that was most insistent was that I had to go to the bathroom. Having been laid up in the hospital before, I've had my share of "bed pan" experiences.

Gritting my teeth, I slowly swung first my left leg, then the cast of my right leg over the side of the bed. As the blood quickly rushed down to my feet, I felt the throbbing return in my leg, worse than before. I also felt light headed, as my body had grown accustomed to being horizontal.

Again taking deep breaths, I waited till the dizziness had passed, though the throbbing remained a dull ache. Holding on to the bed with my good hand, I tried to lock my bad arm against my chest, and stood up on my good leg. Swaying slightly, I realized that I was tall, a lot taller than I used to be. Then again, it could just be my perspective. Damn, this is the wrong time to try to learn how to walk. Using the bed as a crutch, I hobbled to the end, leaving me about three feet away from the bathroom door.

Taking the plunge I hopped on my good leg over to the doorjamb and held on for dear life trying not to fall over. As I got my balance again, I maneuvered into the bathroom and turned the light on. Closing the door, I took a look at the facilities. There was a rather large bowl, similar to what I'm used to at home, only the space behind the seat was a lot roomier than I was used to. It took me a few minutes to remember that some species had a large tail.

Tail. Damn, that's why I was so damned uncomfortable on my back. Looking in the mirror, I saw a short stubby tail sticking out the back. Mentally kicking myself in the butt for being dense, but then again, I'd only been a bear for less than two days. I was allowed a learning curve.

Propping my head against the wall, I used my good hand to relieve myself. Flushing, I got a gentle reminder that there were other calls to take care of. Turning around, I sat down for a squat. I guess bears don't have to go in the woods.

As I was sitting there letting nature take its course, I heard the doctor in the other room calling for me. Being the bright guy he is, he noticed the closed door. Opening it he leaned on the doorframe with an exasperated look on his face.

"You are trying to give me a heart attack?" He said, shaking his head, then gave me a quick look over. "OK. Since you are in here, finish up. But call me when you are done. I don't need you breaking your silly neck trying to get off the john." He told me harshly. I could tell he wasn't happy with me.

As he pulled the door shut behind him, I realized that he had a point. Although there were some hand-bars around, to help people use the shower and etc, none of them would have really been useful for helping a one armed bear not only to stand up, but to also wipe his ass. And of course that brought up other questions....

## Chapter 9

And my day was going sooooooooooooo well.

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After getting a rather enlightening lesson in bodily function and fur maintenance 101 from the doctor, I was aided by an orderly onto a gurney. As they were wheeling me down to the elevators, a matched pair of foxes ran up to the gurney, one wearing a camera and light harness, the other wielding a microphone.

"We're here LIVE with John Doe! John Doe! Can we get any comment from you about Zig Zag's being charged with reckless driving?" The one with the mike asked.

The doctor cursed, and tried to push the young reporter away.

"Wait a second. I said, "Stop the gurney. Let her through." They charged Zig with reckless driving?

The doctor hesitated, debating trying to shield me from the press.

"Doc, please. Let me talk to her." I said pleadingly, putting my hand on his arm, and slowly pulling it back. Once again the microphone appeared in my face.

"Mr. Doe, how do you feel knowing that the woman who hit you, has been charged with reckless driving." She asked me.

Looking into the camera I grabbed the microphone so she wouldn't be able to pull it away. "How do I feel? It's a travesty of justice. It was my fault that I was standing in the middle of the road. She did everything she could to avoid me, including almost getting herself and her passenger killed. Even now her passenger is in this hospital, injured by my actions. If someone should be arrested, it should be me." I told her angrily.

Glaring at the reporter as she tried to pull the microphone back, I let out a low growl. Quickly releasing the microphone, she backed up a step. "Zig Zag came here to find out how I was doing. She was concerned with my well being and took the time to make sure that I was in need of nothing. Since I've been here I've seen nothing in the nature of good will from you or any other tabloid reporter in this town." I informed her, and the world.

Looking back at the camera I continued, "I've seen the supposed impartial news reports being run on TV, and frankly I'm disgusted. Just because she's a celebrity, gives you no right to try to drag her name through the mud!"

"And just for the record, my name is Arden. Arden Nanuk." With that, I released the microphone, allowing the young fox to regain control of it.

"There you have it folks. Arden Nanewk defending the woman who tried to run him down. This is Cindy Lupus for Fox News at Noon." She said into the mike.

I swear by all that's holy that if that orderly hadn't pinned my bad shoulder in a most painful way, I would have probably hospitalized that bitch! (Hey... that one fits!)

## Chapter 9

As the reporters made a hasty retreat, hospital security showed up and escorted them to the exit. Several others followed us to make sure that we weren't accosted again.

While on the elevator, the doctor asked, "Where did you get the name Nanuk?"

Sighing, I finally answered, "I couldn't go around being John Doe, or even Arden Doe. I remembered that Nanuk is the Inuit name for my species. I figured if I had to have a last name, that one would fit me as well as any other."

I could see a confused look on the doctor for a second as he digested the information. "I am happy you have decided on a surname. It will make filling out forms much more convenient now." He said facetiously.

As I looked at him, he finally smiled, revealing that it was all a joke.

Relaxing on the gurney, all I could think about was poor Zig Zag and what she must be going through right now.

# Chapter 10

The price of fame

After getting me settled into my new room, the orderly left with the gurney. Double-checking the sling on my arm, the doctor chuckled quietly. "I hope you know that you are now going to be a target for the media?" He told me.

I knew I had really stuck my nose.... err snout in it good. "How do you mean doc?" I asked.

"Miss Zig Zag is a bit of a local celebrity here with the newsies. She is one of their favorite targets permitting them to point out the sins of her existence. You have challenged them, and they will respond." He answered.

The press would be like a pack of wolves, smelling fresh blood the hunt would be on. Me and my big mouth.

As the doc finished up with the sling, the phone next to my bed rang. The ICU hadn't had any phone, so having one ring here startled me. Glancing at the doc, I picked it up.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Nanewk?"

"That's Nan-NUK, emphasis on the second syllable." I told the person on the phone.

"Mr. Nanuk, this is Bill Treeman from Channel 5 news, I was wondering if I could ask you some questions." He replied.

Gods, but these people were fast. No sooner had I gotten in bed, but they were calling.

"Look Mr. Treeman, but I really have no comment at this time." I told him.

I hung up the phone as he started sputtering something about it just taking a minute.

Fifteen seconds later, it rang again. The doc just leaned back against the wall, his arms folded, smiling at my predicament.

Picking up the phone, I said in a falsetto voice that quavered, "Hello?" I said.

There was silence on the line. The doc stifled a laugh. I continued, "Hello? Bobby? Is that you?"

I heard a distinct click as the other party hung up. Chuckling I unplugged the wire from the handset so I wouldn't have to listen to it, and tossed it on the table next to the phone.

Holding up my good hand I conceded, "OK doc, you were right. Think the hospital would mind screening my phone calls?"

Nodding he moved towards the door, "No problem, my boy. We've done this kind of thing many times. Anyone in particular you wish to allow through?" He asked.

## Chapter 10

"Other than Zig or anyone from ZZ Studios, nope. Just have them leave a message and I'll review them." I answered. "And doc?" He paused, "Thanks!" I said.

Nodding he opened the door.

"Hey doc!" As he turned back to me I continued, "If you won't let me walk around, how about a wheel-chair?" I asked.

"Where will you go? You can't wonder too far or you will be mobbed." He asked.

"I want to go visit Sheila." I told him.

His face softened, and he smiled. "Ahhh to be young again. I will have an orderly come by with a wheel chair." He replied.

Satisfied, I lay back on the bed and tried to relax. My mind was running a thousand miles an hour imagining what Zig Zag must be going through right now.

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As Zig Zag finished signing out her various possessions from the property room at the police station, she began replacing her jewelry. She picked up a necklace that James had given her. It was white gold inlaid with black onyx, the letters dusted in diamond flakes forming her corporate logo for ZZ Studios. It was a spectacular example of craftsmanship and probably had cost him a small fortune. Putting it on, she scraped the rest of her stuff into the handbag, picked it up and walked rapidly to the door. The sooner she could get out of this dump the better.

Exiting into the foyer of the Police Station, she spotted James Sheppard and her lawyer David Leery.

As she approached them, James spotted her and stepped towards her. Taking her into his arms he held her tight, giving her a kiss on the head.

Pleading slightly, she whispered, "Just get me out of here, please!"

Leading her outside, James, David and a few of his office aides formed a flying wedge, forcing their way through the media circus. Glowering at the barking news hounds, they quickly made their way to a waiting limousine and quickly got inside.

Sitting across from Zig Zag and James, David wrapped his tail around his waist, the tip tapping lightly on his leg. Being a large gray colored cat of indeterminate origin, his only distinguishing mark was a large white patch around the end of his snout, framing it like a goatee. Opened the liquor cabinet, he removed a small bottle of scotch. Pouring it into a glass, he handed it to Zig Zag who quickly tossed it down.

Squenching her face for a moment, she gave a cough. "Gods I hate that stuff." She said.

Pulling her close, James held her tight, wanting to protect her. "Don't worry love. Everything's going to be OK." He told her.



## Chapter 10

Leaning her head on him she said quietly, "The bastards strip searched me. For a damned moving violation, they arrested me, hauled me off to jail, and strip searched me."

Glaring at David, James demanded, "Just what the hell is going on here?"

Sighing, David finished pouring himself a drink, and answered, "The new district attorney is trying to make a name for himself. If you remember, he promised to "run the riff raff" out of this town if elected. Apparently he's decided to make Zig Zag his first victim."

Taking a gulp of his drink, he continued, "Don't worry. From what I ascertained from the police station, the accident was caused as much by the elements as well as the guy you hit. There was no indication that you were speeding at all, and, according to the doctor, he didn't think you could have been doing more than 35 or 40 miles an hour when you hit him. Otherwise his injuries would have been far more severe. As for the arrest and strip search, I think we've got the makings of a good civil case. Make the bastards think twice about pulling another stunt like that with you or anyone else."

Hearing this, Zig Zag relaxed a little, sagging into James side as he softly kissed her head.

"On the other hand," David continued, "The guy you hit may turn out to be your guardian savior."

Hearing this Zig Zag perked up and gave David a quizzical look.

Smiling he continued, "Apparently a news crew slipped past security at the hospital and caught him in route from the ICU to a regular room. When informed of your arrest, he agreed to an impromptu interview in which he accepted all responsibility for the accident and ardently defended you and your actions."

Unable to believe what she heard, Zig Zag looked up at James who only smiled and nodded confirmation.

"Not only that, he then continued to berate the local news community for dragging your name through the mud. They had to physically restrain him from assaulting the news hound that that made a snide comment about him defending the woman who had assaulted him. You can't buy good publicity like that." David said smugly.

Taking a deep breath, Zig Zag relaxed, and snuggled into James side a little more. Arden had defended her against the press. She remembered their conversation, and how he had help her come to terms with what had happened, somewhat. She was still haunted by the accident, but it no longer held the guilt that it once had.

"David, I want you to contact the hospital. Tell them that ZZ Studios will pay his bill. Not the insurance company, but the studio." Looking at the lawyer, Zig watched as he made a note in his PDA. "Also I want you to go to the hospital and meet up with him. Anything he needs, he gets. Carte blanche." She told him.

David raised an ear at that, but made the note.

## Chapter 10

"Also make sure he has a way to reach us whenever he wants. Home, office and car phones. Damn. Get him one of those digital cell phones too. Last thing we want is some snoop taping his phone conversations." She instructed, thinking quickly.

Concerned, James asked quietly, "Aren't you going a little overboard with this guy? I know you like to take care of your own, but you don't even know this guy."

Closing her eyes, she quietly replied, "Ask me about my visit to him in the hospital some time." David's head snapped up at this. "Our talk there, and what he did for me on TV are more than enough for me to take care of him." She answered.

Looking up into his eyes, "It's something I have to do." She told him bluntly.

Kissing her lightly on the lips, James smiled, "You're the boss."

Laying down on her back so that her head rested in his lap, she thought to herself, "Just one big dysfunctional family."

# Chapter 11

At last we meet again, for the first time.

Laying in her bed, Sheila had been watching the TV. She had seen the morning report about the accident and was still fuming over it. When she had called the office to talk to Zig Zag, she had discovered that the police had come and taken her to jail, in handcuffs.

"This is like a bad nightmare. How can this stuff be happening to us?" she asked herself for the umpteenth time.

As she watched the TV, they cut to a reporter in the hospital, the word 'LIVE' in big red letters up in the corner. As she watched, she saw the stranger they had hit being rolled on a gurney. Turning up the sound, she listened to the event.

As she watched, a feeling of shock came over her. This guy was defending Zig Zag. Not only that, he was attacking the News and their coverage.

As the journalist finished up her report quipping about how he was 'defending his attacker', the camera caught a look of rage come across his face. Backing up hastily, the camera framed the orderly who was pushing the cart, now applying pressure to the man's shoulder, obviously causing him enough pain to keep him on the bed. Quickly the shot was cut back to the studio where the stunned anchors quickly recovered their composure.

"And there you have it folks. Mr. Arden Nanewk speaking most passionately for the 'Blue Film' star Zig Zag. One can only wonder what took place during her private meeting with him yesterday afternoon."

Laughing her co-anchor quipped, "Boy, what I would give to have been a fly on THAT wall."

As they shared a laugh, Sheila turned off the TV.

Arden. His name was Arden.

Climbing out of bed, she carefully stood up. Holding her right arm close to her ribs, she grabbed her bag from the stand and headed towards the bathroom. Once inside, she got out her brush and tried to clean up her hair. Having been laying in bed for two days, it was a disaster. Only being able to reach up with one arm didn't help either.

Finally somewhat satisfied with her hair, she quickly did her eyes, lips and sprayed a bit of perfume behind each ear. Putting everything away she went back out into the room. Replacing her bag in the stand, she went to the small closet across the room. Taking out a housecoat that Zig Zag had brought over along with some extra clothes from her condo, she cautiously got dressed to go out.

Walking slowly down to the nurse's station she stopped and waited for one to notice her.

"Oh look, Sheila's up. How you feeling girl?" It was the young panda that had been taking care of her, one of the few people who didn't treat Sheila like a second-class person so far.

## Chapter 11

"Pretty good, thanks. Hey, I need a favor from you." Leaning down close, the panda leaned forward also to hear better. "I need to know what room that guy Arden is in."

Smiling the panda leaned back, "Honey it's no big favor. He left instructions that anyone from ZZ studios should be allowed to call or see him and that covers you." Typing on the computer for a second she looked back up, "He's been moved to room 303, that's up stairs one floor, you can use the service elevator around the corner here to avoid anyone snooping around."

Looking to where the panda was pointing, Sheila smiled, "Thank hon. I owe you one."

Blushing slightly the panda said in a low voice, "Just remember that guided tour you promised me, AND the intro to Mike."

Giving her a quick wink, Sheila headed over to the elevator.

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Walking quietly down towards room 303, she heard a commotion down at the other end of the floor. Looking behind her, she could see a couple of reporter types arguing with security at the nurses' station. Glad to have avoided them, she made a mental note to make sure that Mike was VERY nice to her new friend.

Standing outside the room, she could see the door was open. The TV was playing a local classical music station on it. Peeking in, she could see him.

Her first thought was 'God! He's huge!' Lying in the bed, he almost filled it from end to end. Considering it was an oversized bed that was an accomplishment.

He was currently holding up an old copy of Time Magazine. She recognized it as being several months old. Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the doorway and knocked.

Without looking up the bear rumbled "No interviews, please leave"

Clearing her throat she said in a quavering voice "I'm not here for an interview."

"My god" she thought, "was that me? I sound like a nervous school girl!"

Looking up, he squinted towards her for a bit. "Sheila?"

He knew her. But according to the news reports, he had amnesia!

Stepping further into the room, his face broke out into a huge smile. "Sheila! I was just waiting on a wheel chair so I could come visit you!"

He was going to visit me? Who was this guy? And for that matter, what the heck am I doing here?

As he gestured to the chair by the wall he grinned sheepishly, "Sorry for not getting you a chair, but the dock would break my other leg if I got out of bed again."

## Chapter 11

Quickly walking over, she took the chair and set it down by the bed. Suddenly she was back in the ditch, looking into those piercing gray eyes, rimmed in silver. He was reaching out to her again. Suddenly she was back in the room, his hand on hers.

"Hey. You okay there?" He had a concerned look on his face.

"He's worried about me," she thought. "I'm ok, thank you. Just for a second, I saw you laying in the ditch again." Looking down she swallowed. "I thought you were dying."

Leaning back he adjusted the bed so that it was easier to lay on his side, facing her. "Don't worry about me, I'll survive. How are you feeling? I understand that you have a couple of cracked ribs?"

"He had even checked up on me," she thought to herself. Smiling, she said, "Yes, I did, but like you said, I'll survive."

There was a bit of a pregnant pause, his eyes never left her face. Finally he spoke, "I know why I was going to go see you, but what brings you down here to see me?"

Remembering the news her face brightened some. "I saw you on the news when you were in the hall."

Rolling his eyes up, he rolled over onto his back and gave a low moan.

Putting her hand out on his arm quickly she continued. "I think that was wonderful what you did. Not many people are willing to stand up for someone like Zig Zag."

As he turned his head to look at her, she continued, "It was very nice of you. And the look on that foxes face when you tried to attack her was priceless."

Chuckling, he smiled, "Yep, she was lucky that orderly grabbed me before I could get off the gurney. If he hadn't, I don't think she would have gotten far, broken leg or no."

"He's got a beautiful smile," she thought. As her paw stroked the fur on his arm, she noticed how long it was. "Wow, with such long fur, aren't you uncomfortable down here?" she asked.

Bobbing his head to the side for a second he reluctantly admitted "Just a little bit. It's ok if I don't move, but I really overheated when I got up earlier. That run in with the press in the hall didn't help matters much." He breathed a heavy sigh, "Then again, your presence isn't helping my blood pressure much."

She looked back into his face as he gave her a quick wink. Sheila felt a flush coming to her face. "My god, am I blushing?" she wondered.

Seeing the blush through the fur of her muzzle he let out a little chuckle. "I thought you would be immune to blushing by now" he teased.

"Well, maybe it's just the lack of cameras," she said licking her chops.

## Chapter 11

He grabbed his chest with his right hand, "Doh! I've been wounded." Taking her hand in his, he got a very serious look on his face, "You're the reason I'm here. If it weren't for you, I might have given up."

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Why did I have to say that? What was I thinking? I was going to scare her off. As I looked into her eyes, I saw shock, and confusion.

"I don't understand" she said quietly.

"When I first saw you," How could I say it? "The look in your eyes. When you put your hand on my shoulder, it was like a dream. I knew you, your face, the colors of your fur, your smell." Taking a deep breath, "Your name."

As she straightened up I continued. "When I was in the ER, all I could think about was you. You were my lifeline." Lifting her hand to my snout, I gave it a quick kiss. "Thank you."

As I let her hand go, she slowly drew it back. The look on her face betrayed her confusion as she tried to digest what I had said. Looking at her hand, she sat there quietly for some time. I don't know how long we sat like that as all I could do look at her.

The memory of her on my computer screen was as fresh as if I had seen it five minutes ago. Despite Eric's artistic prowess, the 'real' thing was a thousand times better. Her smell lingered in my nose.

We were interrupted by the sound of a knock at the door. Both of us turning, we saw a couple of hospital people in the door. They were loaded down with followers.

"What in the world? What's with all the flowers?"

As they entered, the lady in front, a slightly pudgy hamster, put planter down on the table next to me and smiled. "I'm afraid you made quite an impression with your interview on television Mr. Nanuk. We've been inundated with orders to deliver flowers and balloons to your room."

As the third load came in I put up my hands, "Wait a second. I don't need all these flowers. Tell you what, distribute them around to other patients in the hospital would you? And any more orders that come in, tell them I'd appreciate it if they would make a donation to the chapel rather than buy me flowers."

She stood up a little taller and smiled again, this time it wasn't a polite smile but an honest one. "Thank you sir, I'll do just that. Should I leave this bouquet or take it with me?"

Looking over, I saw that it was a bouquet of roses. "Thank you, but I think I'd like you to leave that one." Reaching over, I took one of the roses out and handed it to her. "However, I would appreciate it if you would take this one for yourself."

## Chapter 11

She cooed as she took the flower. I had never heard a woman coo, much less a hamster. It was a unique experience.

As they filed out Sheila too got up. "I think I had better be going myself."

"Wait." Turning back, I reached back over to the flowers and picking up the entire container. "Please, take these with you. I can think of nobody else I would prefer to have them."

Hesitantly she took the flowers. Quickly she turned, and fled the room.

As she walked away, I had the sinking feeling that I had just annihilated any chance I had with her. I was beginning to wish that this were a dream.

# Chapter 12

Manic depression or just a bad dream?

How could I have been so stupid?

I laid there trying to figure out a way to repair the damage. 'She's thinking that I'm a nut right now. I'm just some kind of total flake with an infatuation and she'll never want to see me again.'

As I lay there, my mind turning in smaller and smaller circles, I was suddenly interrupted by a knock on the door. Looking over, I saw a well-dressed cat in an expensive suit carrying a briefcase.

"So it's time to talk about my bill eh? Hate to break it to you, but I have no idea if I have insurance or not." Turning away from the door, I put my head back on my pillow and closed my eyes. I heard him walk over to the chair that Sheila had left by the bed, and sit down.

"I'm not here about your bill. On the contrary, I came to tell you that Zig Zag has arranged for its payment in full."

I just lay there. I was glad to here that Zig was thinking of me, but the energy was gone. I had blown it with Sheila.

Not getting a reply from me he continued. "My name is David Leery, I'm Zig Zag's attorney."

"Please thank her for me," I said in a flat, emotionless voice.

Setting his briefcase on the table next to the bed, he opened it up and took out something. "Actually I can do better than that."

OK, I may not be a cat, but I still have a little problem with curiosity so I bit. I opened my eyes and looked over to see him holding up a cell phone.

"This phone is programmed with Zig Zag's private phone numbers as well as my own, her close associate James Sheppard and the back door lines to ZZ Studios. She has instructed me to give it to you and ask you to use it when calling her. It is one of the new digital phones that uses an encryption system so your conversations will be private."

Handing it to me I examined the phone. It wasn't very different from the phones of my world, and I quickly figured out how to browse the names database.

"The phone is paid for by ZZ Studios with Zig Zag's compliments. I want you to realize that you are now counted in the circle of a very few people that Zig Zag trusts. Please don't disappoint her."

As what he said sank in, I nodded. "Don't worry, I have no intention of hurting Zig Zag either by intent or accident."

I could feel him examining me, I felt like a bug under a microscope. "You have no idea how relieved to hear that. I don't know what you and Zig Zag talked about when she



## Chapter 12

visited yesterday." He held up a hand as my head turned to look at him. "That's between you and Zig Zag. As her lawyer, I am privy to her business and legal needs, you shouldn't feel compelled to tell me anything you don't want to."

Closing his briefcase with a sharp snap of the clasps, "Zig Zag has also requested that I see to any requirements that you need. If you should find that you are in need of anything, please call my office and they will obtain it for you. Is there anything you can think of off hand?"

Thinking about my situation, I didn't believe that he'd be able to get me a second chance with Sheila. However a few things did occur to me. "I was found without clothing. I will need clothes. I don't know how easy it is to find something for someone my size. You might get your people on it."

As I spoke, he took a PDA out of his suit pocket and began writing, "Anything else?"

Hmmm, as long as he's asking, "I'm also rather uncomfortable. Sheila pointed out to me that I've a bit more fur than is normal for this climate. I was going to ask the doctor if he could see about doing something for me, maybe you have a suggestion."

Smiling, he nodded, "No problem. I know a great stylist who also deals with long fur customers. I'll arrange to have them come down and visit you. According to a few other longhairs I know, they're a miracle worker. Anything else?"

Shaking my head no, he snapped the PDA closed and started to get up. Seeing that something was still wrong he sat back down.

"You know, for someone who's just been given the person phone numbers and a carte blanche expense account by one of the most popular adult film stars in the world, you sure don't look to enthused."

I turned towards him and tried to smile. "Sorry, I'm just having a bit of trouble with my lifestyle right now. I'm just a little depressed with everything that happened with the press, and since then." Remembering the press, "By the way, how's Zig Zag, I understand the police had a warrant out for her arrest?"

As he spoke, he wore a very serious look on his face. "Normally I don't talk about my clients, but I believe you have a right to know. Today she was arrested at her office, taken in hand cuffs to jail where she was strip searched and thrown into a holding cell for prostitutes. No doubt all that will be in the news anyway."

Before I could get too worked up he continued, "She's OK now. I got her out within an hour of her arrest. I had her and James driven in our limo to his farm outside of town. I'm hoping that the news hounds don't know about it."

Knowing she was ok helped, but I could still feel the blood pumping. I heard small pops as the claws of my hands penetrated the sheets and mattress.

"I think you should know that your talk with that news hound today was most helpful."

## Chapter 12

That cut through the red fog that was building. "How did it help?"

"The media has attempted to make you the victim in all of this. Some poor innocent bystander who was mercilessly run down by the evil porn star." Seeing me nod in agreement he continued, "You on the other hand just kicked the ladder out of their crusade to crucify Zig Zag. Everyone who saw you on TV knew without a doubt that what you said was sincere and unrehearsed. Your attempt to get to the reporter after she tried to take a parting at Zig Zag also reinforced the opinion that she was the wronged party. Your attack on the media has had a very interesting effect on general public attitudes towards Zig Zag. I got a call as I was coming in the building from a friend of mine over at Pin Striped Polls. Zig Zag's general approval rating has climbed significantly since your interview. Her general approval rating was 12%, their latest ad hoc poll indicates that it's up over 30%. Meanwhile, the poll shows that public confidence in the media for 'fair and accurate reporting' has dropped to an all time low of 32%."

I lay there, thinking about what he said. Apparently something good came from all that after all.

"Zig Zag said that when you're ready to get out of the hospital, you've got a job waiting for you at the studios."

Confused I asked, "Doing what?"

The twinkle in his eye betrayed his attempt at a strait face, "Why acting of course." Noting my confusion he dropped the hammer, "Remember, you were found naked, and Zig Zag is always, how should I say it, keeping an eye out for well qualified talent."

As what he said sunk in, I felt my face heating up. It's one thing to work with people in that business, but it's another thing to actually contemplate being in FRONT of the cameras.

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As the sun was setting, James looked out onto the back porch of his house. Spying Zig Zag in a rocking chair, he picked up the two drinks he had prepared and walked out the back door. Handing one to her, he settled down in the other, and began slowly rocking it back and forth while watching the sunset.

As the last of the sun was about to disappear behind the horizon, he looked over at Zig Zag. Enchanted by the orange glow of the setting sun on the white of her fur, he noted that she still wore the necklace that he had given her. With each breath she took, tiny points of fire flared from the diamond dust that was embedded in the metal creating a scintillating pattern of light that appeared to chase itself around on the face of the letters.

As the last of the light faded, so did the fire. Even then, Zig Zag just sat, drink untouched in her hand.

"Zig? Are you ok?"

Blinking, Zig Zag came back to the present. Slowly turning her head, she looked at James as if for the first time tonight.

## Chapter 12

"Are you OK babe?"

She gave him a small smile, and reaching out with her hand, she took hold of his between the chairs. "I'm all right. Just tired."

"What were you thinking about? You seemed a million miles away?" Giving her hand a squeeze, James hoped she would open up and not try to hide what was happening to her.

"I was thinking about Nanuk."

James waited patiently, hoping she would continue.

"There's something about him. I can't explain exactly what it is. It's like I've known him forever, but yet I've never seen him before." Giving a shiver, "It's like he is the ultimate case of *déjà vu*. It's strange."

Concerned now, James leaned a little towards Zig Zag, "You don't think he's dangerous or anything do you?"

Her eyes popping open, as if she hadn't quite been awake, Zig Zag turned to him and smiled. "No. It's not that. I've never met a man like him. I got the feeling that he knew a lot more than he was letting on. Like he was afraid that if he said the wrong thing something disastrous would happen."

Suspicious now, "You don't think that he planned the accident do you? Just to get to you?"

Finally noticing the drink in her hand, Zig Zag took a swallow. "No. I'm certain that's not the case. I still see the accident, and the look in his eyes, like a trapped animal. He didn't know what was happening."

Taking another sip, "I'm not sure, but I think he might have been hit by the lightning. Or it could have hit close enough to have affected him."

Shrugging, she continued, "I don't know. That's the odd thing about it. If he had been hit, there would have been electrical burns, but the doctor didn't find any, and then there's the question of his appearance. He was totally nude, in the driving rain. A longhair like him in our heat should have passed out from the heat somewhere. Yet he was just kneeling in the middle of the road, as if he stumbled and fell."

Not really understanding, but willing to go along James nodded. "From the sound of him, he is unique. What little I saw of him on TV, he definitely looked like a throwback, but the way you describe him, he's too intelligent and well educated for that."

Trying to find a way to broach his concerns, James finally decided on the direct route. "Zig, do you think you're doing the right thing? Giving him the phone, carte blanche and a job offer?"

An honest smile and a small chuckle came from Zig Zag as she laid her head back and looked at the man she loved. "You know how much I love to collect strays. Can you think

## Chapter 12

of a better project for me? And you must admit that I do owe him for standing up for me today. Besides, you didn't see him in the ditch. I could use talent like that."

Chuckling, James quipped, "Just as long as you don't come out of retirement for his debut."

Hand in hand, they stood up and headed inside, determined to put the worries of the day away, and enjoy their time together that evening.

# Chapter 13

You only get one second chance.

213. That was the number of messages that I got today. That's not counting the threatening calls that were given directly to the cops. The messages ranged from marriage proposals to people accusing me of being the spawn of Satan. Some of them were down right funny. One was a Weasel claiming to be my twin brother. It takes all kinds.

Putting the box of "duds" on the floor, I placed the more interesting ones on the table. There were requests for interviews from all the local media, as well as some national ones. I'd talk to Dave before deciding on whom to talk to. He'd know who to avoid and what their angles are.

Turning off the light, I adjusted the bed so I could sleep comfortably. Despite my fatigue, I couldn't sleep. All I could think about was Sheila and how bad I'd screwed up. Giving up on just relaxing, I began doing some mediation exercises to relax my muscles and mind, hopefully to get some sleep.

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I awoke in the glade again. It was all wrong. There was snow on the ground, the pond was frozen over, the trees were bare and I could hear nothing moving in the woods. A freezing wind began to blow and I suddenly realized that I was very cold. Standing I saw that I was human again. Quickly I rushed into the hut and closed the door. The room almost looked abandoned. The fire was out and no food was on the table.

After a few minutes work I managed to get a fair sized fire going in the pit and the room began to warm up. Still cold, I huddled near the fire, trying to get warm. Hearing a noise on the other side of the room I saw Nanuk step out of the shadows.

"I don't know why I chose you to be my son." Squatting across the fire from me she continued. "I thought you were smarter than that."

Ashamed of my self I couldn't answer.

"Why do you think I helped you get to this reality? So that you could throw it away?"

Meekly it was all I could do to reply, "No mother."

"Bah. Mother is it still." Rocking from side to side she just stared at me. "Still, one mistake does not a tragedy make. You still have a chance my child."

Shaking my head I replied, "I don't see how mother, she must think I'm a deviant, someone who's crazy, and to be avoided. She'll never accept me now."

My head snapped up as I heard her roar. Stepping across the fire pit she hit me hard with her paw, sending me sprawling across the room and ending up against the wall. Dazed I looked up at her form as she hovered over me, a fire burning in her eyes that I had never seen before.

"Think you know better than Nanuk?" she demanded with an angry snarl on her face, her ears laid back.

## Chapter 13

Holding an arm up in a futile attempt to block any new blows, "No mother! I'm sorry, I wasn't thinking!"

Her eyes narrowed and she let out a low growl. Leaning close I could smell the meat from her last meal on her breath. "That's right. You do not tell Nanuk what can or cannot be. I'm older than your race and will still be guiding my children long after you and yours are gone."

Satisfied she backed up and squatted on the other side of the fire, watching me again. Painfully I managed to get to my spot by the fire, still a bit stunned from the blow.

"Tomorrow you will have a chance at redemption. You must be honest, but for spirits sake child, use some common sense. We don't want to scare her off."

A light bulb went off over my head. Sure it was a 20W or 30W one, but the illumination helped. "I know why she's important to me mother, but why is she so important to you Nanuk?"

Smiling at my question, she had a look of satisfaction. "Now you begin to think. One can only ride the current so far before one goes over the falls."

Finally sitting down, she made herself comfortable. "I have looked within this Sheila of yours, and I like what I see. She is worthy of one of my children. I believe that she will make a suitable companion for your coming journeys."

I was confused, what journeys. Before I could ask the question she answered it. "I can not tell you what is to come, only that you will have a better understanding of yourself and the potential within you. Now it is time for you to go back. Your appointment with destiny awaits you my child. This time, think before you act."

As she finished speaking, a strong gust of wind blew up against the hut, causing the door to swing open. A heavy blizzard was blowing outside, and the wind quickly doused my fire.

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I awoke with a start shivering with the memory of the dream. Looking at the clock, I could see it was almost 9AM. I had slept for almost ten hours. A knock on the door brought me fully awake.

Looking to the door I saw a tall Otter pulling a cart loaded with cases. He smiled at me said with an odd accent "Hello, are we awake?"

Doesn't anyone speak in the first person any more? "I'm awake now thank you very much."

Bobbing his head quickly while flashing a smile he started into the room with his equipment. "I am Philippe, David called and said you needed my services." The accent was French.

## Chapter 13

Thinking for a second, I remembered he was going to send over a hair stylist, or rather a FUR stylist. Sitting up I waved him over. "Thank you for coming. I've been a bit uncomfortable like this. I understand you can help out?"

After closing the door he started to unload boxes of equipment from his cart and asked me to remove my gown, so as to be better able to get a picture of how to trim me.

Sounds reasonable to me. After all David did recommend this guy. Besides, if he does anything funky, I can always give Dave a bit of a mauling in return for the favor.

Giving me a first look over he cooed and said, "Oh my, you ARE a big one aren't you." Now I knew I'd have to be sure to thank Dave for this guy.

Plugging a hose into the wall, I heard the sound of suction. Seeing my look he explained, "The hospital keeps a series of pipes for suction in various procedures. My equipment allows me to trim you and catch the fur in a basin using the hospitals suction, and yet not clog it with hair. It is also much quieter and less likely to disturb your neighbors."

Taking a brush to the fur on my arms, he began to tease it and work the knots out. "You have very long fur. I have never worked on someone with fur this long. You come from the far north eh?"

Shaking my head, "I don't remember. I lost my memory in the accident. I don't even know where I'm from."

Making tisking noise he continued to check the fur on my shoulders, and back. "We must decide how you wish to wear the fur. This long it would be gorgeous if properly cared for, but doing such would be a full time job. On the other hand, a very short cut would give you tremendous muscle definition, but might tend to itch. Personally I'd suggest a combination of the two. For your arms, head and upper torso we go short. As we progress downward towards the hips we allow the fur to lengthen. At the waist, I will not trim just even it up. When one is with the women, one wants to have a bit of mystery and there is nothing like a good long layer of fur to leave one dressed while yet undressed, no?" Sounded reasonable to me.

"For the arms legs we do the same thing. Trim the top short, go down to just under the bend, below that point, we just do some trim and shaping to give you, again, the look of wearing clothes without actually wearing anything.

"Sounds like you're going for an exotic look to me."

"You are an exotic creature monsieur, one must accentuate the strong points. Never have I had a customer that this would work for until now. Trust me, it will look splendid on you. And if you do not like the look, we can trim some more to make it more uniform for you."

I had to admit, it sounded like a fascinating look. Nodding to Philippe, I decided I might as well relax and go with the flow. I just had to make sure to get out before I hit the falls."

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As he worked, Philippe talked with me constantly on every subject from what I liked to eat, to what team might win the World Series. Eventually we got around to the accident. The little guy hadn't even heard about it.

"Why should I waste my time listening to the tripe they spew on the Television? I have better things to do with my ears than to listen to reporters try to tell me what to think so I will agree with them." This guy sounded pretty reasonable. Despite my original assessment, I was getting to like the runt.

"I am glad that I was able to get to you this early. I had no idea what a BIG project you were. If I had come any later I would have had to change my appointment with the lovely Sheila."

That got my attention. "You're going to work on Sheila Vixen after me?"

"But of course silly boy, who else would I be talking about. I take care of all the talent for Zig Zag. You are a most lucky man, Zig Zag only hires the best to take care of her people. There is no way I would have dropped my morning appointments to take care of you if it weren't for her."

"Hold on a second there bud. Just so we have things strait, I'm not one of Zig Zag's talents. I'm not even sure what I'll do even if I do accept a job there."

"You are pulling Philippe's tail. With your, um, attributes shall we say? One such as you could write their own ticket in her business. Philippe likes your joke."

Why does everyone assume that I'm going to be doing the nasty in front of cameras for Zig Zag? Doesn't she have other jobs that don't involve over exposure?

He continued on, "Surely you have an eye for the Sheila, no? I have been told by other performers that she is most talented."

Think about calculus. No try trig. Last thing I needed was to have this guy get me excited. Time to redirect the conversation.

"So you handle Sheila normally?"

Making a rather indecisive noise, "Sometimes. She often goes to Maurice, but as my salon is just across the street from ZZ Studios, they all come in to take care of work related hair problems.

"Tell me about her will you?"

"Eh?" He stopped trimming. "She can be soft spoken but only in private, very private, and yet quite a tease with the fans. She enjoys just about every type of music but is very eclectic about which song she likes. I had to make some CD's for the stereo at the boutique or she would have me changing the channel with every other song. She enjoys reading, riding her bicycle, sailing and of course her work. Philippe thinks she has been at



## Chapter 13

the studio since before Philippe began working with Zig Zag, and that has been almost nine years now." Shaking his head he continued to cut. "Why is it you ask?"

Sink or swim? Go with the flow, or is that Niagara Falls coming.

"She came to see me yesterday."

Once again he cooed. "And were there sparks?"

"I think so, maybe, but then I put my foot in it. I'm afraid that I screwed up big time and scared her off."

"No...." Looking up from his work near my groin he put his hands on my knee and rested his chin on them. "Tell Philippe all about it."

Sighing I told him about the accident and then our meeting. "So you see, when I told her that she was the reason I was here, I think I freaked her out. I'm afraid I scared her away Philippe."

Cocking an eyebrow for a second, he went back to work trimming my leg, "It is possible, but you never know. Saying such a thing can be quite a shock. Perhaps she will believe a plea of temporary insanity, no? You did have the blow to the head, no?"

He had a point. "Yah, that's true. I supposed I could plead insanity. The problem is even getting the court to come to order. I'm afraid that the jury may have already rendered a verdict."

He chuckled, "Philippe thinks you were a lawyer maybe. Philippe will fix it for you. When Philippe works on Sheila's hair today, Philippe will put in a good word for you. After all, you didn't eat Philippe, eh?" I distinctly got the feeling that he wanted to add a 'at least not yet, no?' to the end of that sentence.

Chuckling at the little guy, I decided that hope springs eternal. Now I had to concentrate on some trigonometry, lest something else spring eternal while he's trimming down around there.

# Chapter 14

A new look, a new beginning or a new nightmare?

Sitting on her bed, legs crossed and idly flipping through a fashion magazine that Tammy had dropped off this morning, Sheila's mind kept coming back to her conversation with Arden. She couldn't understand what was happening. Why did he keep showing up in her dreams, and what was the significance of the medallion? Dejected she tossed the magazine to the side and turned on the TV. Maybe the zombie box would distract her.

Flipping channels she tuned into the local UHF independent station that was running their news. These guys were pretty radical and were almost as entertaining as watching The Daily Show. Turning up the volume she listed to them rattle on about the presidential race for a while. These guys looked for any excuse to jump on not only the candidate but also the networks coverage of the event. Her ears perked up a little when Zig Zag's picture came on.

"And who doesn't know about the latest happening of our favorite Sex Star, Zig Zag of ZZ Studios fame." Bringing up a graphic from the cover of Zig Zag's last movie, "Our favorite tramp was getting the raw deal from the powers that be today until her guardian angel, or should I say avenging angel," cutting to a clip of Arden trying to get at the reporter during his interview, "kicked some ass today as he defended Zig Zag from the media's charges of being nothing short of a mass murderer out on an early spree."

Cutting to an image of the two anchors from the station he continued, "Frosty and Flake were of course their colorful selves today unable to pass up any obvious innuendoes they could toss into the mix, although this time one must wonder just why this guy is so hot to defend the woman who hit him. Most folk would be talking to a lawyer looking for a six or seven digit income bonus, but not our man."

Cutting to a freeze frame of Arden snarling when the reporter tried to take the microphone. "Reports from the hospital say that our boy has amnesia and can't remember anything before bumping heads with the Mercedes. If this is true, then we have a real life gentleman folks. If this guy is for real, then he's indignant not because he's got a thumper for Zig Zag, or even hoping for a little skunk funk on the side, but because he's seeing someone getting the shaft," giving the camera a sly grin, "outside of the movies that is."

Cutting to a picture of Zig Zag coming out of the police station, "And what of the Gestapo's arrest and STRIP SEARCH of our soiled heroin in this little drama? According to sources in the justice department, the action was ORDERED by none other than Uber Furer, err. District Attorney Daniel Kahnsman as the first phase in his attempt to get rid of the 'Riff Raff.' Sources inside Attorney David Leery's camp inform us that a rather substantial civil suit is in the makings that might make Der Uber Furer think twice about pulling this kind of stunt again"

Graphics faded and they zoomed back in on the commentator, "This is one spectator that can't wait for the next chapter in this exciting drama. We haven't had a good mud fight in this town since the election that got Der Uber Furer elected to his post. I for one am cooking up some popcorn and waiting for the show to unfold."

## Chapter 14

Turning the TV off, Sheila shook her head with a little smile. That guy didn't pull any punches, but then again at least he was showing all sides, even if it was in an off-handed fashion.

Lying down and pulling the sheets up she turned off the lights, rolled over and went to work on going to sleep. She'd be getting out of this mausoleum tomorrow and couldn't wait.

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Once again, Sheila was standing in the strange bedroom. Looking around she once again spotted the chair, bed and finally the mirror. Walking again to the mirror she saw her reflection. This time fighting the terror of the dream she examined the face closely. Looking at the eyes she could see that although the shape was different, they had the same piercing green color that she was used to seeing in the mirror each day. Turning from the mirror, she was drawn to the door. As she stepped out of the door, she saw before her a farm with a large barn, a pen for some animals along with a road passing in front. Walking out towards the road she became aware of a presence behind her. Turning she saw a massive creature towering over her. It had grayish green skin, two large fangs protruding from its upper jaw and a large shock of gray fur upon its head. Its ears were similar to what she saw on herself, only they curved upwards to a point as they flared out from the skull. Striking quickly it reached towards her...

\*\*\*\*\*

Waking with a start Sheila could feel the blood pounding through her body, adrenaline flowing in an effort to assist in her flight, a flight that had only been a dream.

Getting up she walked to the bathroom. Running water in the basin she quickly washed her face in cold water, the shock at clearing her head. Looking in the mirror she studied her eyes, the image she had seen in her dream almost overlaid on reflection in the mirror.

'He's not the only one that's gone nuts around here is he?' Licking the last of the excess water from her muzzle she proceeded back to bed thinking 'I must have hit my head harder than I thought.'

Lying down, she rolled over onto her other side and tried to get back to sleep, hoping that the dream would not visit her again.

\*\*\*\*\*

As Philippe finished up trimming and buffing the nails on my feet, err... claws on my paws? Whatever, after finishing up he stood back from the bed and with a very theatrical imitation of Dr. Frankenstein said "Arise my creation, arise!"

"Sorry Philippe, but the doc would kill me if I started walking around."

Waving a hand, "Pish tosh on the doctor. All I need you to do is stand up for Philippe so Philippe may finish the shaping of your fur. You do not need to go anywhere, just lean on the side of the bed."

## Chapter 14

What the heck, I was getting a little tired of lying down anyway. Standing up, I held onto the railing until the dizziness passed. Now vertical, I remembered that I needed to take care of other priorities.

"Hey Philippe, help me over to the bathroom first will you? I need to use the facilities."

Putting a hand over his mouth, his eyes almost bulged from his head. "Philippe has not let you take care of nature yet? Philippe is most sorry, let Philippe help you." Leaning on him like a crutch, I made it safely over to the bathroom.

Hobbling inside, I closed the door. Fortunately no gymnastics were required to relieve myself. Pressure abated, I headed back out.

Standing in the door, Philippe took some small clippers and a comb. Quickly making small adjustments to the length of the fur, he tapered and shaped first my arms, then waist, and finally my legs. Then turning me around he began working on my back. After another fifteen or twenty minutes of standing, I was starting to get fatigued.

"I'm going to have to sit soon here Philippe. My good leg's getting tired."

Still clipping, now around the middle of my lower back I heard him reply, "Not yet, Philippe is almost done. Just give Philippe a few more minutes and he will make you perfect!"

Reaching up over the door, I saw that there was a horizontal bar set in the frame. From the looks of the bars in the ceiling, they were probably to help move patients that were paralyzed. Grabbing the bar, I used it to take the weight off of my leg. Although my hands were now taking the weight, it was somewhat restful just hanging from the bar. Relaxing my back muscles, I felt my spine popping as it uncompressed.

"Eureka! Philippe is fini!"

Turning, I saw him rooting around in a large box. Taking out a small square object, about two-foot square, he quickly unfolded it. As the edges pulled the surface tight, it turned into a reasonably good quality full-length mirror.

As I looked at my reflection, I was stunned. I didn't look anything like I had before.

The front of my face was now closely trimmed back to the neck and down to the shoulders. On the top of my head he had pulled the fur straight back between my ears and down towards my shoulders. The sides of my head immediately in front and below the ears was closely shaved, yet the fur on my head behind them remained long, almost to its original length. As I turned, sideways, I could see that he had left my shoulders long and combed backwards, so it almost looked like I had pads or epaulets on. The fur on my back was full at the top, but as it tapered down towards my waist, it narrowed to a point on my spine in the middle of my lower back. The lower parts of my arms were haloed in fur, having the appearance almost of a large, bell bottomed shirt. The effect was the same on my legs, with the fur terminating just above the top of my feet. On the front and rear at

## Chapter 14

waste level, he had trimmed it so that I looked like I was wearing a short loincloth. The effect was stunning. I had been turned from a walking mop into a work of art!

I'm not sure how long I stood there, but I was brought back to reality when I heard the sound of the door opening followed quickly by something hitting the floor. Blinking I looked over to see Zig Zag standing in the doorway, her purse on the floor. Her eyes were wide open, and her mouth hung slack. She just stood there.

Philippe let out another of those girlish giggles. "You see! You see! Philippe has made you a GOD! You will need the proverbial base-a-ball bat to keep the females off!"

Not taking her eyes off of me, Zig Zag turned her head to Philippe. "You did this Philippe?"

Pulling himself up to his best height, he tilted his head back in a posture of triumph, "Philippe has once again created a masterpiece!"

Eventually blinking, Zig Zag shook her head to clear it. Realizing she had dropped her purse, she recovered it from the floor and stepped in. Walking around me to check it out at every angle, she spoke, almost inaudibly. "Good lord Philippe! I said to make him presentable, not to turn him into cover art for my next project!"

Looking up at me, she raised an eyebrow, "Anything on under there?"

Shaking my head, she turned to Philippe. "Once again you have worked a miracle Philippe. How can I ever thank you."

As he began folding up the mirror he smiled at Zig Zag, "Just make sure to invite me to the filming of his first movie. That and the usual fee."

Chuckling Zig Zag give him a quick kiss, "Anything you want Philippe. Thanks for the help on short notice."

Continuing to put away his equipment, "It was no problem. At first I was a little put out at the last minute call, but once I saw what you gave me to work with." Rolling his eyes to the heavens, he kissed his fingers, "I could not have asked for a better canvas."

As those two were busy patting themselves on the back, I decided to hop-hobble over to the bed. Unfortunately my good leg was a little more tired than I thought, and loosing my balance I started to fall. Fortunately I was close enough to the bed to catch the railing, and avoid a total spill, however the cast on my leg forced my body to twist around and loosing grip on the railing, I was unceremoniously dumped on my rear.

The only minor problem is that short stubby thing that sticks the back of my ass was in the way.

Curling into a ball, I rolled over onto my right side and let out a low groan of pain.

Both dropped what they were holding and rushed over to where I lay on the floor. Trying to breathe deeply, I fought for control of the pain.

## Chapter 14

Both of them were busy asking me if I was ok while the pain finally reached it's peak and leveled off. Still breathing hard I managed to grunt out, "Yah. I'm ok. Just give me a minute to get control."

I heard Zig Zag telling Philippe to ring for the nurse, "NO! Don't. I'll be ok I tell you, just give me a minute."

As I continued to take deep breaths the pain slowly began to fade. I could tell it wasn't going to go away any time soon, but at least it didn't have me seeing red.

Relaxing a little I opened my eyes. Both Zig Zag and Philippe were kneeling over me, concern etched in their faces. "I just landed wrong on my tail. It hurts like a son of a gun, but the pain's starting to fade."

Rolling over onto my good knee I inched over to the bed. As I grabbed the frame to leverage myself up, I felt both Zig Zag and Philippe grab my arms to help me up. Eventually I managed to haul myself into the bed. Laying on my face, I pulled the pillow up under my chest and tried to relax.

As I lay there I felt a hand on my back. It was Zig Zag probing around by my tail. Although it ached, there were no sharp pains. Just as I thought she was finished, she did something just under my tail that I swear almost levitated me off the bed. It didn't hurt, not directly anyway, but the bodies reflex was to pull my tail down, HARD.

Chuckling, Zig Zag apologized, "Sorry. I wanted to make sure you didn't break anything."

"And that last little trick confirmed it?"

Leaning over, she whispered in my ear, "Nope, but it was very educational." Giving my ear a little nip, "For the both of us, I'm sure."

As I lay there, I listened to Philippe finish packing up his equipment. As he and Zig Zag talked, I tried to relax. That damned trick of Zig Zag's had left me in a rather uncomfortable state. I wasn't about to roll over until I got things back under control.

After Philippe left, Zig Zag grabbed the chair and pulled it up to the bed.

"How you feeling?"

"I REALY wish you hadn't done that," I said with a sigh.

Giving a sly smile, "That's for not calling me yesterday. Or do you think I had Dave give you that phone just because I have too much money on my hands?"

"No. But I figured with all the stuff that happened to you yesterday, the last thing that you'd need would be me pestering you."

Putting a hand on my shoulder she gave it a quick squeeze. "Some how, I don't think a call from my knight in shining armor would have been too much of a bother. I can't thank you enough for what you did yesterday."

## Chapter 14

"I can think of one thing that would be priceless." Looking at her, I gave her the most lecherous look I could summon up while doing my darndest to lick my right eyebrow.

Zig Zag was surprised by my implied proposition. Her face betrayed the disappointment that she felt towards me because of it. She thought I would be different.

Before she could answer, I blew her a kiss and whispered in a husky voice, "Would you just PLEASE stop telling people I'm going to be in your pictures?"

The look on her face was priceless.

Revenge is a dish best served cold.

# Chapter 15

Excuse me, but aren't you dead?

Sheila sat, cross-legged on the hospital bed looking out the window. Watching the traffic as it passed by on the street below, she tried not to look at the clock. Watching it wasn't going to get her out of here any faster. The fact that, although she slept through the rest of the night, she had still dreamt about Arden. Some times it was at the accident, then the hospital room, and strangely enough, with them dancing in a ballroom. The ballroom had been filled with shadows of people dancing, making them the only two real people there.

Her train of thought was interrupted by a knock on the door. Turning her head, she saw it was Philippe. Standing, she went over and gave him a hug.

"Philippe! You wonderful little man! What on earth are you doing here?"

Moving into the room with his equipment, he started to get setup. "Philippe was told that we were getting out today and Philippe thought it would be best to make sure that we were presentable."

Picking up the chair, she moved it to the middle of the room and sat down with her back to the wall. "You don't know how miserable I've been here Philippe. You're just what the Vixen ordered!"

Concern showing on his face, he began to brush her fur, "Tell Philippe all about it and Philippe will make it all better."

As she related the story of the accident and discovering the body in the ditch, Philippe made the appropriate noises of comprehension.

Trying to decide if she wanted to tell Philippe about her dreams, or what happened with Arden yesterday, he interrupted her thought.

"And what of this strange man who knew your name? Surely there are thousands, no, MILLIONS of people who know your name. That is not to be unexpected, no?"

Shaking her head, "You don't understand Philippe. There's something strange about him. I don't think he's just a fan."

Leaning close, Philippe spoke into her ear, "What are we keeping from Philippe? If Philippe does not know, Philippe can not fix."

Feeling the luxurious sensation of Philippe's brush running through her fur, Sheila tried to lose herself in the sensation. A snort from Philippe brought her out of it.

"So, not talking to Philippe are we? Philippe is hurt. We do not trust Philippe any more."

Putting her head down, she spoke quietly. "It's not that Philippe. You don't understand. It's more than just that."

Philippe hummed, the tone rising to make it a question.



## Chapter 15

"I've been having dreams Philippe. About him."

Philippe smiled, "Ahhhh," and waited for her to continue.

"Some of them are nightmares Philippe, and others are normal. I don't know what to make of them."

Confused Philippe stopped brushing, "He is in these nightmares?"

Shaking her head, "No. I don't see him in them, but I know some how he's related. My dreams with him in them are of the accident, although last night I dreamed we were dancing together in a room full of shadows."

Philippe continued brushing out her fur, "The accident was a most traumatic experience, no? So it is expected for one to have bad dreams about them. The mystery of his background makes you uncomfortable. Maybe that is why we see the shadows when dancing, no?"

Perking up a little, it suddenly dawned on Sheila that she never told Philippe about his memory. She turned her head and shot Philippe and accusatory look. "How did you know he has no memory?"

Putting a paw to his chest, Philippe mimed being wounded. "We think that Philippe does not what everyone knows?"

Embarrassed that she hadn't thought of that, Sheila turned back.

"On the other hand, this morning Philippe did have the honor of transforming him into a work of art."

Sheila's head snapped around so fast it hurt. "You saw him this morning?"

Nodding, he used a paw to turn her head around. Taking out some clippers he began to trim off the uneven ends of her fur. "Philippe did talk to him. He is a most extraordinary person. He is under the impression that he has made us afraid of him and never want to speak to him again. Is that true? Do we not wish to ever see him again?"

Her feelings were confused. She couldn't quite get a handle on them. "I don't know Philippe. He's so strange, and yet there's this pull I feel towards him. It's not physical and yet it is. Oh Philippe I don't know what to do."

Putting her face in her paws she began to cry. "I'm so confused Philippe."

Setting his tools down he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her. "Philippe has never steered us wrong, no?" After she nodded he continued, "Then listen to Philippe. Philippe talked to him about this a long time, and is sure that we are precious to him. He would never allow any harm to come to us. Listen to Philippe and give him another chance. Philippe is certain that we won't regret it." Saying a small prayer he thought, 'At least Philippe hopes we do not.'

## Chapter 15

As Philippe's words penetrated her emotional fog, Sheila began to come to grips with what he said. Turning her head, she gave him a quick kiss on the side of his muzzle. "Thank you Philippe."

Releasing her, he picked up his tools and set back to work. 'Ah, to be young and in love again,' he thought.

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Still belly down on my bed, the pain was slowly fading from my tail. My talk with Zig Zag had been pleasant once she got over my little barb. Apparently she had an apartment they used for out of town talent to stay in. Once I was released from the hospital, I could stay there while looking for a place of my own. It wasn't scheduled to be used for a couple of months until Bjorn Otterson came over from Scandinavia to film Bjorn to Party. Still not sure how I was going to be of use at ZZ Studios, I re-emphasized that I didn't want a position in front of the camera.

Zig Zag only chuckled. That woman has a one-track mind. Unfortunately I was afraid it was aimed between my legs. Ah the burdens of having a fantasy body in a fantasy world.

As I was thinking about how to find a computer job without revealing that I remembered my past, there was a knock on the door. Looking over I saw a tall male Tiger in a cheap suit. He had brown on black coloring rather than orange. He'd be murder to spot in the dark.

Coming in he picked up the chair, turned it around and sat down with the back to me.

"You're a cop, right?"

His ears perked up at that, "How did you know?"

"Well, so far every person who's sat with the back of the chair facing me has been a cop. The Seers and Rubik's suit kind of gave you away too."

Giving a quick nod, he took a wallet out of his sports coat, flipped it open and handed it to me. He was Michael Jones, Detective Sergeant with the Columbus Police. I handed it back to him.

"What can I do for you Detective?"

He pulled a folder out of his brief case. Opening it, he looked at me, "I have good news. We've been able to identify you."

I wouldn't have been more shocked if he'd reached down and done that little trick Zig Zag had done. Not being prepared for it I'm sure my confusion must have shown on my face. How could this be? I didn't have a background here. I didn't exist before that fateful Sunday evening.

"How did you find out? The other cops said my fingerprints turned up negative!"

## Chapter 15

Examining the contents of the folder, he kept glancing at me as he spoke. "The officers who ran your prints did so at 4:35pm on Monday, at which time they came back negative. When I re-ran them today, I got a positive hit, a most unusual positive hit at that." His eyes narrowed as he looked at me.

I was at a total loss here. This was impossible. How could my prints NOT be there, then show up a day later? Something was wrong! "Unusual how?"

He handed me a high-resolution fax. It was of a death-certificate for one Arden David Bearridge who died at 10:35 Sunday evening from injuries sustained in an automobile accident in Kansas City, Missouri! The same time that Zig Zag hit me!

As I read the report I couldn't believe my eyes. This was me! It had my old address on it, the same car, the same license plate, everything! My God, I had an alternate in this world, and he had been killed in a car wreck!

I suddenly realized I couldn't breathe. Grasping at my chest, I kept trying to catch my breath. The room felt like it was spinning. I became aware of Jones yelling for a doctor or nurse. The last thing I heard before passing out was laughter. That damned laughter.

# Chapter 16

Guilty until proven innocent.

Michael Jones was a cop. He was a damned good cop. And that's why they had made him a detective after only five years on the force, much to the chagrin of other officers looking for promotion. His captain had warned him that the powers would be were watching.

After getting back the info from the FBI's fingerprint database, he had gone to confront this mystery man that had somehow been killed 600 miles away, while at the same time getting hit by a car on the edge of town. Either the guy had faked his death, someone had stolen his car, wallet and just happened to have dental work that matched his records, OR he was the one in a trillion that would match up on the fingerprints. Numbers two and 3 were immediately discounted as being absurd. That only left number 1. So either the guy had arranged to have someone killed in his place, or he was supposed to be in some kind of witness protection plan, and something had gone terribly wrong. If so, where were the feds?

To his horror, the guy had suffered some kind of attack when he showed him the death certificate that Jones had gotten from the coroner's office in Kansas City.

Yelling again for help, a doctor and several nurses began running down the hallway to the room. Moving back in side, he watched helplessly as they checked him over.

"He's not breathing... No pulse.... WE NEED A CRASH CART IN HERE..."

Christ what had he done! One of the nurses was pushing him out of the room, "You can't be in here right now."

Standing outside, he made room for a nurse with a large cart to get by. As he watched they had rolled the guy over and were giving him CPR.

As the door slowly swung closed in front of him, he felt dizzy. Leaning on the doorframe the same words were repeated over and over in his head. 'What have I done?!'

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Getting ready to leave the hospital, Sheila had just finished packing up the small overnight bag that Zig Zag had brought her. Straightening up the tight fitting skirt that she had put on, she slipped on her stiletto heels and looked down at the effect. 'We're dressed to kill today aren't we?'

Placing the bag on the bed, she headed out into the corridor and down to the nurses station. As she passed by, she heard a wolf whistle from on of the male nurses there. Giving him a quick wink, she continued on to the service elevator.

Taking it to the 3rd floor, she got off and stepped around the corner towards his room. As she approached the room, she saw an off colored tiger standing outside the door. His brown on black color striping looked odd against the traditional navy blue suit.

As she started to open the door he spoke, "I'm sorry miss, but you can't go in there right now."

## Chapter 16

Giving him a confused look, "Why not?"

As his eyes broke contact with hers, he hung his head, "He's had some kind of an attack, they're inside working on him right now."

The shock of his words struck her like a physical blow. 'Good lord! He was afraid that I hated him. If he dies, he'll never know that I don't!"

Just then the door opened, and a nurse began rolling the cart out, looking in she could see that another nurse was taking his pulse. The doctor, holding a paper in his hand strode furiously towards the door. As he got in the hall he turned to the tiger, holding up the paper he said to him in a strong voice, "Just what the hell is this!?! Were you TRYING to kill him or something?"

Seeing the doctor held the death certificate, Jones could only shake his head. "You don't understand. I got a positive hit on his identity. That death certificate belongs to him. I wanted to get his reaction to seeing it. I never thought that something like this would happen!"

Shoving the paper into the tiger's hand he growled slightly, "Did it ever occur that he wasn't in this hospital for a vacation? My god man, he was struck by a car less than four days ago!"

A combination of horror and remorse etched into his face, Jones replied, "I'm sorry. I didn't know. I didn't think!"

"That's right damned it! You DIDN'T think. Next time you pull a stunt like that with one of my patients I'll have you arrested for attempted MURDER!"

Eyes wide, the tiger just swallowed.

Feeling a touch on his shoulder, the doctor's head snapped around to see Sheila touching him lightly. "Will he be all right doctor?"

Calming down a little, he nodded, "Yes. There were several things that combined to bring this on, but I am confident it won't happen again." Looking at the detective he continued, "As long as we can try to avoid sudden shocks that is."

Giving them another quick look, "If you'll excuse me now," he headed back towards the nurses station.

Remembering the paper in Jones's hand, and the comment that he had identified Arden, Sheila stepped over to him. "You said that you had identified him, how?"

As if seeing Sheila for the first time, he asked, "I'm sorry, but who are you miss??"

"I'm Sheila Vixen, I was in the car that hit him. I was the passenger."

Nodding, "All right. Yesterday I re-ran his fingerprints to make sure the traffic guys hadn't missed something and got a positive ID on him. The unfortunate part is what kind of ID I got on him." Distractedly he handed her the paper, allowing her to read it.

## Chapter 16

Sheila couldn't believe what she was reading. This was a death certificate for someone who had died the same night they had hit him. Confused she looked up at the detective, her question unspoken.

"I can't explain it. I was hoping that by watching his reaction to reading it I might get an idea. Unfortunately I hadn't anticipated such a reaction. I never thought this would happen."

Looking again at the paper, Sheila asked, "But what does this mean? How can he have a death certificate and be here? I don't understand."

Taking the paper back, he folded it up and placed it in a pocket. "Neither can I, and that's the real mystery of the whole thing."

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Having finished talking to the doctor about Arden's condition, Zig Zag took one of the main elevator's to Sheila's floor. Entering the room, she saw the overnight bag on the bed, but no Sheila. "Ok kiddo, where did you run off to now?" After waiting a few minutes, she decided to check with the nursing station.

Sitting behind the desk was a nice looking coyote filling out paperwork. She cleared her throat to get his attention.

Looking up his eyes quickly became the size of dinner plates. Leaning forward Zig Zag gave him her best publicity smile. "Hello, would you happen to know which way Sheila Vixen went?"

Still not blinking he pointed to the service elevator, "Ummmm..... She went to see that guy on the third floor."

Blowing him a little kiss she thanked him and headed for the elevator. Just as she was about to press the button it, the bell for the door dinged. As she waited for them to open she saw Sheila get off the elevator.

Sheila walked right by Zig Zag as if she wasn't there.

"Sheila?"

Turning she saw Zig Zag for the first time, but still didn't say anything. She had a haunted look on her face.

Zig Zag didn't like the look on her face, "Sheila? What's wrong girl?"

"There's a cop downstairs. He says they identified Arden."

Now clearly confused Zig Zag shook her head. "Isn't that good news?"

Looking into Zig Zag's eyes, she could be barely heard, "He was identified by his death certificate."

## Chapter 16

The shock of hearing this struck Zig Zag physically and emotionally. 'A death certificate? How could he have a death certificate?' Then his comment came back to her, "The person you hit survived."

"No, this is NOT right!" Shaking her head violently Zig Zag declared, "Something is definitely not right here! Where's that cop you talked to?"

Again going to the third floor, they saw the cop still standing outside of Arden's door, the door closed. Striding purposefully up to the cop Zig Zag demanded, "What the hell is going on here? You flat feet think you can just screw with me and my people whenever the hell you want?"

Looking Zig Zag directly in the eyes, Jones straightened himself up and replied, "No madam, I have no intention of screwing with either you OR any of you're people. I'm trying to find out the truth here." Taking the certificate again, he handed it to her. "This paper says that the man in this room died the night that you hit him with your car at approximately the same time over SIX HUNDRED MILES away!"

Unfolding the paper Zig Zag read it. It described an "Ursine of indeterminate genus" killed in an auto accident. The body was burned beyond recognition requiring the identification to be using dental records.

Seeing the look on Zig Zag's face as she read the document, Jones commented, "I'm sorry. I know how others have treated you in the department, but please believe me when I say I'm just trying to get to the bottom of this. That's all."

As the door opened, a nurse stepped out into hall and closed it behind her. Jones caught the nurse's attention, "Beg your pardon miss, but can I see him now?"

"I'm sorry, the doctors given strict instructions for him not to be disturbed right now."

Taking a business card from his jacket, James handed it to the nurse. "Please have someone call me as soon as the doctor says he's able to answer some more questions." Nodding, the nurse took the card and walked back towards the station.

Finished reading, Zig Zag looked up, "Would it be possible for me to keep this?"

Thinking for a second, James decided that it was bound to get around any time now anyway. Besides, she had a vested interest in the guy from what he had heard. "Sure, just don't pass it around please. I have another copy at my office."

Folding the paper, Zig Zag looked at Sheila; the confusion and concern she felt was mirrored in her face.

# Chapter 17

An opportunity missed means more exercise trying to run it down.

Daniel Khansman was not a happy man. His crusade against Zig Zag had been destroyed by the actions of a stupid reporter and that damned bear. He hadn't bought, bribed and blackmailed his way into this office to have it all screwed up by some idiot with a conscience.

Sitting in the plush leather chair of his office, looking out the window at the traffic, he contemplated his next step. A knock on the door interrupted his thoughts. Giving a low growl, he made a point of ignoring it. He had left specific instructions not to be disturbed.

Opening the door he heard James speak, "Mr. Khansman?" Without turning he rumbled, "I left instructions not to be disturbed. What part of those instructions did you not understand James?"

Gulping, the young cheetah screwed up his courage and stepped into the office, closing the door behind him. "I think you'll want to see this sir. It's about the guy in the hospital."

Watching the DA turn his chair around to face the desk, James once again got a good look at the panther in the tailored black suit. His luminous yellow eyes glared at James through the slits of his eyelids.

Taking a hasty step forward, James continued. "They identified the guy." Another low growl came from Daniels.

Swallowing, "Um. It was a death certificate sir." Leaning forward he placed the document on the desk, quickly pulling back his hand as if he feared Daniels would bite it off.

Picking up the paperwork, Daniels leaned back in his chair and examined the document. It was a death certificate from Kansas City for a male who had died the same night that this man in the hospital was hit.

Putting the document back on his desk he leaned back, steepling his fingers in front of him. "Get some people on this right away, contact the police in Kansas City and find out what you can on the deceased."

Nodding the cheetah quickly turned and headed towards the door. "And James." Stopping, he turned and looked at his boss, "Good work James." Relieved that the risk he had taken had worked out, James smiled to himself as he left the office. He had definitely just scored some points with the boss.

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When I came to, I was lying in Nanuk's hut; my head lay on her lap as she stroked my fur. Looking down, I saw that I was a true bear. Trying to speak, all that came out was a quiet mewling sound.

"Hush child. You're dying." Looking in her eyes, I saw tears. "They are trying to bring you back my child." Quietly she sang to me, a song of mourning. As I lay there I thought about everything that had happened, and that maybe this was for the best.



## Chapter 17

As I lost consciousness my last thought was that I'd never get to see to Sheila.

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Gasping for breath I woke up. There were doctors and nurses standing around me, a mask was over my muzzle where it had been breathing for me. My chest felt as if a mule had kicked me. Trying to catch my breath, I could hear them talking but it just didn't sink in. Finally one of the nurses put an oxygen tube over my snout with two segments that forced air into my nostrils.

A light flashing in my eyes got my attention. It was the doc checking me out. "What the hell happened?"

The doctor, still checking my eyes asked back, "What do you remember?"

Blinking at the light I remember that tiger Jones, and the death certificate.

"There was a cop here, a brown on black tiger. He said he had identified me."

Putting the light away, "What did he find out?"

Looking around on the bed, I notice the paper on the edge, "He discovered a death certificate." Reaching up over my head, I couldn't quite get it. As it slipped to the floor the doctor caught it. "Last thing I remember was reading that thing, I couldn't believe what I was reading." Pulling him close I whispered, "It's me doc, it's me. Everything I remember from my other life."

Letting go of him, I laid back, "Next thing I knew, I couldn't breathe, and my chest felt like I had an elephant sitting on me."

Nodding he examined the paper and scowled. "First thing I should tell you is that it's not good for you to lay on your stomach like that. You're physiology isn't designed to allow you to breathe properly like that. Being already low on oxygen, your heart was working overtime pumping your blood. When the adrenaline hit your heart, it experienced the equivalent of a muscle spasm. It compressed, but couldn't release enough to allow blood back into the chambers and stopped. For almost three minutes you were technically dead. We finally managed to get it restarted by shocking you. You were very lucky my boy. Now if you will excuse me, I must attend to someone that may require some medical care in the very near future."

Turning I saw him walking angrily towards the door, the paper crumpled in his hands. He looked like he was out for blood and I felt for the poor fool who got in his way.

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David Leery was sitting at his desk looking at a pile of paperwork that was growing steadily. Being council for ZZ Studios may not be all fun, but it was NEVER boring. He had just gotten phone call from Zig Zag and she was coming for a visit. He could count the number of times she came to his office on his left paw.

Carefully stacking the papers in such a way as to be easily separated again later, He hollered for his new intern. "Jenny, would you come in here please?" A large white rabbit

## Chapter 17

came into his office. She had no distinguishing marks, though she wore a series of earrings in her ears. Whenever she twitched them, they jingled.

"Yes Mr. Leery." Handing her the pile, he continued to straighten the desk. "Zig Zag's coming and we need to clean up. Put those in a safe place and in that order. I'll want the stack back AS IS once she's gone."

David finally finished cleaning up his desk and sat back to examine the results. Just as he was about to put a folder on his desk for effect, Zig Zag came in, causing him to abandon his efforts.

Walking quickly from the doorway she sat down across from David, taking the paper from her purse, she unfolded it and placed it on his desk while not saying a word. Keeping her face as neutral as possible, she watched David pick up the paper and read it.

As he perused the information, David became very concerned. If it was true, then something is very wrong here. Looking up at Zig Zag, "Should I pursue it?"

"I don't know. I'm very confused by this." Looking down she was once again trying to turn a very expensive handkerchief into a rope. "What do you think?"

Picking up the phone he pressed the extension for his assistant. "Jenny, get me Sean McLaughlin and Andrew Sheppard please."

Cocking an eyebrow at David, Zig Zag added, "I presume that's a yes?"

"We're in too deep with this guy to back out now. If the DA discredits him, then it will discredit his defense of you. It won't hurt the case against you, or our civil case, but it will sure do a number on public opinion."

Rubbing the bridge of his snout with his paw, David took another look at the document. "How much do you want to spend on this Zig?"

Thinking for a second, Zig Zag finally came to a decision. "Use our best judgment, but remember" standing up, "if you go overboard, it's coming out of your Christmas bonus."

As she walked out of the door, David picked up the phone again; he'd need to call in a lot of favors on this one.

Working for Zig Zag was never boring.

# Chapter 18

Information is power, but so is electricity.

Listening to Beethoven's Symphony No. 5, I was reminded of just how close I had come to death, again.

Closing my eyes and relaxing, I tried to allow my mind to float with the music, but something was stopping me. It was like hearing two different radio stations at once. After a few minutes of this I suddenly realized I was hearing Nanuk's song. Turning inward, I sought the path.

Standing in the clearing I took a deep breath. The smell of wild flowers was in the air again. A small flight of songbirds took off from the trees, circled around and landed again, all the time chirping their songs. Nanuk was obviously in a good mood.

Walking inside the hut, I saw her standing there before me. Stepping forward into her embrace we held each other, savoring the life I had been granted again. "I almost thought I had lost you there my child."

"I too thought I was lost mother."

"Things are not entirely as they should be my son. The one of whom I will not speak has caused far more damage for you than I had originally thought." Releasing me, she walked me to the fire pit and indicated I should sit.

"It is too soon for you to be learning these things, but I must. He tasks us and without what I shall teach you, all may be lost."

As she sat down I tried to digest what she was saying. "I don't quite understand mother. What is it that you must teach me."

"You have heard my songs, and answered my call. You have also heard my songs and been healed by them. It is time I teach you to sing your own songs." A storm of emotions flooded into me: shock, confusion, amazement, and anticipation. Most importantly was anticipation. Seeing me finally latching on to that one last emotion, she continued. "By bringing you across the boundaries that separate worlds, he has allowed you to touch the vale, and thus he has given you powers that you do not yet know of."

'Whoa Nellie,' I thought to my self, 'I've got powers?'

"Yes child. And don't call me Nellie." Chuckling at the surprise on my face, "I am part of you as you have now become a part of me. I know what goes on in that mind of yours. Believe it or not you have power. In this world they are very limited. Indeed almost exclusively to your self. Walking the path of the bear means that you walk the path of a healer, and thus that is where your power lays. In this one area you can effect others, but not to the degree in which you can effect yourself."

'Healing! She had sung her song to me that first night, and I awoke healed. No wonder!' Seeing the comprehension on my face she nodded, "Your abilities have a drawback. Healing will always task your body, especially healing of another. Also being a healer you must try to avoid physical conflict."

## Chapter 18

This I didn't understand. "But mother, bear is strong and fierce. What have I to fear?"

Sadly she shook her head, "Bear is strong and fierce, but it also has a blood thirst my son. Once conflict is initiated, bear seeks to destroy that which threatens it. Only when bear has rendered its prey dead, or believes it's dead will bear relent. You must guard from this lest it control you and destroy you."

Swallowing I understood what she was talking about. I had seen television documentaries that talked about bear attacks, and the best way to survive one was to play dead. I was a walking contradiction in terms. I had the ability to heal, but also to kill. It would be a very sharp edged blade.

As I came to grips, Nanuk began to teach me her songs, preparing me for the future.

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Returning from my meditations, I opened my eyes and saw the world anew. All the colors were stood out in a vivid spectrum of pallets, each unique to the object yet a part of the others. I hadn't seen anything like this since doing some acid at a DeadHead concert ten years ago. I had an incredible sense of well being that I had never felt before. Taking a deep breath, I felt my ribs expand and contract with only a small twinge of pain. Nanuk had taught me her song well.

Hearing someone outside the door, I looked over to see who would come in.

It was the doctor. Closing the door again, he pulled up the chair. "It is good to see you awake my boy. You had a close call today." I noticed he had a notebook in his hand, the kind that college students use to take notes in.

I removed the oxygen tube from my snout. "I no longer need this doc."

As he reached to replace it I grabbed his wrist and held it. Fighting my strength he tried to pull away but could barely budge my arm. "I no longer need the oxygen. I've recovered. You need not worry about me."

Releasing his arm he pulled it back. Rubbing his wrist slightly he gave me an odd look, finally reaching up behind me and turning off the oxygen. Sitting back down he asked, "What has happened."

Pointing to the book I asked, "First, what is the book?"

Remembering that he had it, he handed it to me. Opening it I saw it was actually two books that had been combined into one binder. On the right the pages were old, yellow and somewhat faded, while on the left the pages were new and bright. The text on the left was English, the right German. As I flipped through the book, I saw that it was his father's research on the Amulet of Lakesh. He had written a translation in English on the left of the original on the right.

"Those are the notes my father made about the amulet and it's background.." As I flipped through the pages I saw the face of the amulet. Holding my hand up in front of

## Chapter 18

the page I could see that his rendering of the design matched it exactly. Further in I saw that he had done the same for the back.

"And now you my boy. What has happened?"

Reaching inward, I looked for a sign from Nanuk, hearing none, I decided I was on my own.

"What do you know of totems?"

"Totems? Aren't those the posts that your natives had with faces carved on them to scare away evil spirits?"

I chuckled silently. He was to be pardoned; his people had lost the way of the spirits long before the American natives. "Totems are far more than just faces on a post. The natives believed that each spirit took a form here that corresponded to something found in nature, the wind, fire, rain, lightning and also animals. There are spirits for every animal each with it's own unique strengths and weaknesses."

Looking at him, I could see his interest, but it was in a detached sort of way. "The spirit of the bear is a powerful totem. Bear represents not only great strength and power, but also healing."

Nodding, I saw that he didn't make the connection. "In my world I took what's known as a spirit quest to find my spirit guide, essentially to find what totem I followed. In that quest I met Nanuk. Nanuk is my totem."

I waited while it sunk in. "You are telling me, that because you follow this bear spirit, that it is helping you to heal?"

Good, very good, "Yes. When the amulet brought me over to this reality from my own, it had to change me. In the process it opened what you might call a conduit to the spirit realm. When I'm injured, I can call upon the power of my spirit guide to help me heal. That's why I had recovered so well that first night."

He sat back, a slack jawed look on his face as he considered what I said. "To think that such a thing could be my boy. It's too amazing. All these years we have discounted these spirits as merely primitive superstition."

Shaking my head, I tried to correct him. "These spirits aren't just of this reality! They exist in all the realities. The only difference is what form they take. The bear is not always a bear. Some worlds don't have bears, you see? The form is but an icon, representing the power, but not in and of itself the power."

I could see he finally understood. "Thank you my boy. I understand now. This is a most intriguing discovery for me. I must think on this." Standing he put the chair away and went to the door. Turning, he took another look at me, "Thank you." Then left.

Once again I opened the book, this time reading what the good doctor's father had written a lifetime ago.

## Chapter 18

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After being dropped off at her condo by Zig Zag, Sheila quickly unpacked her things and put the overnight bag away in the closet. Grunting with pain, she managed to put it up on the overhead shelf. Holding her side she walked over to her CD collection. Taking out a soundtrack of recorded forest sounds she put it in the stereo.

Getting a cup of water from the bathroom, she took one of the pain pills the doctor had given her and headed over to her bed. With all that happened at the hospital today she was drained, emotionally and physically. Laying down she rolled over onto her good side and relaxed. As she slowly drifted off into sleep she thought she heard a bear singing on the CD. Smiling she closed her eyes, inwardly chuckling at the idea of Arden singing.

# Chapter 19

No more Mr. Passive Resistance

Michael returned to the station house to try to get some work done. From the sounds of it, the doctor at the hospital wouldn't be letting him visit his suspect today. Sitting at his desk he noticed someone had cut out an advertisement for Life Cereal and stuck it on his desk. Plastered on the front was "Hey! Mikie! He likes it!" Crumpling up the advertisement he tossed it over his left shoulder without bothering to look. He heard the electronic ringing of the basketball hoop that sat over his wastebasket as the ball sailed through the ring. His colleagues took great pleasure in teasing him about his name. He was Michael, not Mike, not Mikie, not Mikearony and most certainly not Michelangelo. Anyone could see he was neither a turtle nor a martial artist. He remembered the first day when his new "partner" had decided to keep screwing with his name. After giving him warning after warning Michael finally lost it and wound up holding the little rodent up at eye level against the wall with one hand while shredding the front of his suit with the other. It had gotten him into a trouble with the chief, and he had been forced to replace the suit, but it had the desired effect. Nobody teased him to his face, although anonymous reminders were a daily occurrence.

Opening the file drawer in his desk he took out the "Doe, Jon 2000-35" file and opened it up. He may not be able to talk to the guy, but he could still work the case. Flipping to the back of the file, he reached for the spare copy of the death certificate. Pausing, he noticed that it was upside down in the file. Michael was as meticulous about his paperwork as he was his name. Someone had been in his file.

Looking around to see if anyone was paying attention to him, he returned to the folder. He could understand someone wanting to see what was happening with the case, but for the document to be upside down, it would mean they removed it, probably to make a photocopy. That meant someone was probably going to get a bonus from some tabloid for helping break the news.

Picking up the file, he gave a small snort of derision at the unknown culprit. That kind of profiteering was second to prostitution in his mind. They were supposed to be cops, why the hell couldn't they act like it.

Proceeding to the copier he made two extra copies of the entire folder and returned to his desk. Placing the original file back inside he closed the drawer. Reaching into his top desk drawer he took out a combination lock that he occasionally used when going to the gym. Placing it through the hole in the tab on the front of the drawer, he locked it. That would stop some casual snoop from digging through his files for now. If someone wanted to badly enough, they could get the lock off, but not without destroying it.

Satisfied he placed the copies in two new folders and headed out of the station. This was his first real investigation that involved serious fieldwork and he was in the mood to bang on some doors.

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Closing the book I lay back in bed and thought about what I had read. Examining the cover, I saw the name "Elijah Grahl"

In the few days that Dr. Grahl had spent researching the amulet he had discovered some interesting things about it. According to legend, the demon Lakesh was one of the first demons cast out from heaven along with Satan for trying to overthrow god's plan. Lakesh was a particularly important to Satan's plan to overthrow the cosmos as Lakesh had been responsible for maintaining continuity of the plains. This gave him the knowledge needed to bend or break certain rules that were set in motion when God created the universe. Lakesh had created the medallion as a way to break the law and thus bring chaos to order. However, the fact that he was only a demon limited the effect that it could have upon the universes. There had also been mentions of other items of Lakesh that had been created, functioning differently, but with the same ultimate goal.

The only thing that was specific about the amulet was that he had made a rough translation of the script on the back with the help of a linguist at the university. "A (wish/desire/need) (requested/granted/made) is not a wish (?) (fulfilled/accomplished), never to be (repeated/returned/restored)"

Buzzing the nurse's station, I asked them to send for the doctor please. I had things that needed to be done: Determine how to clear my name, apologize to Sheila, and hopefully try to learn something about my new world. I wasn't going to get any of that done lying around in here.

It was time to talk to Dr. Grahl about getting my fuzzy butt out of this place.

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In her dream, Sheila was walking through a forest. The sun was streaming down between the breaks in the leaves. All around her she could hear the singing of birds and the droning of bees and other insects as they went about their business.

Coming to an open glade, she saw a small stream trickling into a pond. Kneeling down to get a drink, she looked into the water and saw her reflection. Her face had changed once again, to that of her other dreams, only this time it was somehow different. There was no fear. It felt almost as if she were in a waking dream.

Looking closer she saw that her face was not quite the same as it was before, it was narrower than the other dream, and the ears were curved to a point at the top rather than rounded. The eyebrows looked like a bird's wing in flight rather than the arches she was used to, and the shape of her eyes were more of an almond shape. Her snout was less pronounced than before, sloping in a gentle curve outward from her brow to a triangular tip that was reversed from the normal shape. Opening her mouth, she saw that her teeth were a combination of flat and sharp, that of an omnivore, rather than the sharp tearing teeth of her old face. The only constants were the green of her eyes, and the large volume of red fur that still fell from her head.

Standing she looked down at herself. Though furless, her shape remained strikingly similar to before, though she lacked a tail, and she noticed that each hand held an extra finger. Flexing the fingers on her hands, she found the sensation eerie but yet not uncomfortable.



## Chapter 19

As she looked around she saw a primitive hut standing near the edge of the glade, smoke wafting up from a hole in its roof. Entering, she saw a comfortable looking though sparse environment. As she spied some baked bread and a drink on the table, she realized that she had an over powering hunger. Sitting, she poured some of the liquid and began eating. As she finished eating, Sheila realized she was tired again. Going to cot near the fire pit she lay down, and relaxed. The last thing she heard as she fell asleep was the gentle sound of someone singing.

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After leaving David's office, Zig Zag headed back to her house. Calling the office on the cell phone, she verified that there was no pressing business at the shop. Right now she just wanted to go home and soak in the Jacuzzi. Heading into her bedroom, she undressed and put on a robe. Grabbing a large terrycloth towel, she headed out to the kitchen. Grabbing an ice bucket, she took a couple cans of diet soda out of the fridge and, after placing them in, covered them with ice. Grabbing one more can and a glass, she picked everything up and headed out to the combination Atrium and Jacuzzi room. Setting the bucket, glass and extra soda by her favorite spot, she disrobed and tossed it and the towel over onto a near by chair.

Going over to the timer she verified the temperature on the Jacuzzi and set the timer. Watching with satisfaction as the jets kicked in, she closed the timer box and carefully climbed into the tub. Letting herself sink until the water reached her neck, Zig Zag allowed her body to fall backwards slowly till she simply floated, buffeted by jets of air and water coming from all directions. Had she been a cat she would have purred.

Finally feeling the kinks start to work out of her muscles, Zig Zag gently straightened up and moved over to her favorite spot. Pouring some soda into the glass, she took a sip. Stewing in this tub could really take it out of a girl, especially in a fur coat and she was always careful to keep hydrated. Normally she would have had a refreshing wine cooler, but it was too early in the day for her to be drinking. Reaching over past the drinks she picked up the omni-remote for her entertainment system. Switching it on, she activated the stereo system in the living room, then activated the speakers in the Atrium and selected a series of songs by Kitaro. He was always good for relaxing to.

Putting down the remote, she adjusted the nozzles a little then leaned back and closed her eyes in quiet contentment, determined to let the worries of the day be washed away on the currents of the jets.

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When Sheila finally woke up, she looked over at the clock and saw that it was already 4:38PM. 'Good lord! I've been asleep for almost 3 hours! That pill must have really knocked me out.'

Rolling over, Sheila got up and headed to the bathroom. After taking care of Mother Nature's call, Sheila realized as she cleaned up that her ribs didn't hurt as much when she twisted. Experimenting she discovered that, although they still ached, the sharp pain was gone. 'Wow. That's some pill the doc gave me. I'd better be careful I don't over do it.'

## Chapter 19

Heading back out to the bedroom, she shucked off the dress she had worn home from the hospital. Unwrapping the bandages that they had put to keep her ribs stable, Sheila gently probed around where her ribs had been cracked. Again, there was the dull ache, but no sharp pain. Carefully re-wrapping her ribs, she went to her closet.

She didn't have a lot of stuff that would look good on her while wearing a elastic bandage around her ribs. Finally giving up on any of her usual outfits, she went instead to her dresser and pulled out a Hooter T-shirt and a pair of denim pants. Quickly dressing, she picked up her purse and went over to her makeup table. In a rack next to the table was a series of bags for all occasions. Taking out a small one resembling a day timer, she started to transfer items between her main purse and the new one.

Pulling out the amulet that Arden had given her she paused. Once again, while looking at the markings on the back she came to realize that it felt warm. Suppressing a shudder, she opened up a small jewel box and pit it inside. When Sabrina was in town, she'd have to get her to help find out what that thing was. Sabrina had been to college and knew about images; surely she'd be able to help find something out.

Finishing up with her handbag, Sheila went over to the full-length mirror and checked out her appearance. "We may not be dressed to kill kiddo, but we are DEFINITELY dressed to shop!"

With a spring in her step, a renewed Sheila Vixen headed out for the mall.

# Chapter 20

A new look for a new look

As I waited for Dr. Grahl to come back I propped up the bed and turned on the TV. Surfing around I quickly skimmed over the channels. Stopping at a local UHF station that was showing a strange looking version of Hogan's Hero's. I always thought Hogan looked kind of like a Black Lab. Leaving it on in the background. I was flipping through the book again when I heard the program change. It wasn't until I heard my name mentioned that I bothered to look up and pay attention.

"That's right folks, the guardian angel in white for that slightly sticky personality Zig Zag has been identified. His name is Arden David Bearridge. Good news I hear you say? This reporter though so too until we were given a copy of THIS document."

Flashing up a close up of the death certificate, you could clearly read my name as well as the fact that it was a death certificate. "According to this innocuous piece of paper, our newest celebrity is DEAD folks! You heard me right DEAD! Zig Zag is now receiving support from the great beyond." Logan flashed the camera an impish smile. "According to details in the death certificate," text began scrolling as he spoke, "Mr. Bearridge was driving his Ford Explorer on the 435 loop outside of Kansas City, when a defective Firestorm tire blew out, causing the vehicle to crash and burn. The body had to be identified with dental records. To make things all the more interesting, the accident occurred at the EXACT same moment that our snowy white friend was butting heads with Zig Zag's passenger door."

Cutting to a picture of the corridor in the hospital, I could see Dr. Grahl, Sheila and Detective Jones standing. Doc was shaking the death certificate in Jones's face. Obviously it had happened after my resuscitation. "And what of the intrepid brown and black police detective Michael Jones? Apparently Jones, who had discovered the information, confronted the recently undead in the hospital with proof of his death. Our sources think that he may have been trying to convince him to crawl back into his crypt as, upon showing him proof of death, our mystery man once again left the world of the living. Reports say that he was with out a pulse or respiration for almost three minutes."

Cutting back to the commentator, "As Dirty Harry would say, 'No trial and less paperwork to file.' Fortunately for our not so shining knight, hospital staff managed to resuscitate him despite the best efforts of the good detective. Some how I don't think Der Uber Furer would have shed a tear if he had joined the choir up above."

Disgusted I turned it off. The fecal matter had certainly struck the rotary atmospheric motivator.

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Sheila sat at a table in the food court of the Columbus MegaMall, sipping on a soda as she took a break from shopping. She couldn't believe her luck! While driving her home Zig Zag had mentioned that she was going to send Clarence out to buy some clothes for Arden. Sheila remembered laughing so hard that she almost passed out not only from the lack of oxygen, but the pain in her ribs. What made it all the more humorous was that Zig Zag didn't seem to think it was all that funny. From what Sheila had heard, it had taken some major female intervention by his current girl friend to get him this far away from

geekdom. Last thing Sheila wanted was that poor kid trying to buy for someone twice his size, while struggling to not mix stripes and patterns.

Despite Zig Zag's protest, Sheila declared that she'd do the shopping for their new friend, after promising repeatedly NOT to over do it. So far, she had four bags of clothes in the car and still felt good. It was almost 9PM and her ribs were just fine. Picking up the one bag she had just finished filling, Sheila headed for the upper deck exit. Passing by 'Ultimate Leather Experiences', she just had to swing in if for no other reason to find out if there were any new accessories. As she wondered around, she spotted a spiked collar the size of her thigh. Giggling, she grabbed it. Almost tempted to look around and see what else would fit him, she finally decided to see how he responded to this.

Smiling with anticipation, Sheila headed for the checkout counter.

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Soaking in the Jacuzzi, Zig Zag was enjoying that fog one gets into as total muscular relaxation occurs when the phone rang. Tempted to ignore it, she decided that it must be important or they wouldn't have called. Picking up the universal, she muted the speakers and hit the hands-free conferencing button."

Letting out a sigh, she spoke loudly into the air. "Yes?"

"Zig Zag? This is Mickey, have you got a second?"

Closing her eyes, and giving a quiet sob of anguish to herself, she finally admitted that there was no rest for the wicked. "Sure thing Mickey, what do you need?"

"I got a call from Bjorn's agent. It seems that Phusion Films has pushed up their date for his shoot by a month, and says that unless we can move ours up, Bjorn won't be able to fit us into his schedule."

Taking a deep breath, Zig Zag mentally reviewed the production schedule. Bjorn was not only a well-endowed porn star, but had the good graces to actually be able to act. Having started in porn films, he wasn't shy about them, and still enjoyed doing the occasional shot for Zig Zag when a reasonably good script showed up. Unfortunately he was scheduled to make a feature film that would easily net him fifty million or more and there was no way on earth he'd put that off to do a shoot for Zig Zag no matter how much fun it was."

"Call his agent back, tell him we can start shooting next Wednesday, also let the prop guys know that they need to dust off the old house scenery from 'Bjorn to Teach'. " There was no way they'd be able to get sets made in time to shoot, hopefully they could do the 'at home' scenes and give the prop guys enough time to make the other backdrops. "Let everyone know that we're going to be putting the New Years special on hold for Bjorn. Got that?"

"Right. Call Bjorn's agent and tell him we start shooting Wednesday, have the prop guys pull out the old house set from Bjorn to Teach, and tell everyone we're putting the New Years special on hold till we're done with Bjorn. Anything else Zig Zag?"

## Chapter 20

"Nope. Get on that and let me know if you have any more problems with Bjorn."

"Sure thing boss." Hitting the button on the remote, she hung up the speakerphone, then un-muted the stereo. Just as she was lying back to relax again the timer kicked off.

As the foam faded from the pool, Zig Zag just sat there and promised whatever powers that be, that she'd get her revenge some how.

\*\*\*\*\*

As I lay in bed reading a magazine, I found myself humming the healing song that Nanuk had taught me. I could almost feel her arms about me. Life was good.

Hearing the door open, I folded up the magazine. It was Dr. Grahl. "You needed me for something my boy?"

"That I do doc. I need out."

That took him aback a bit, "You were dead yesterday. How am I supposed to justify your release?"

He had a good one there; fortunately he had left me plenty of time to think this argument out. "Just tell them that I'm being transferred to a private care facility that, for security reasons cannot be disclosed."

Mulling it over I could see him trying to think of an excuse. Trying to cut him off at the pass, "Doc, my ribs are almost completely healed. My shoulder IS completely healed. My leg is well on the way to getting there and should be ok within a week. There's no reason to keep me here and every reason not to."

Hearing that last part, his eyes narrowed into slits and I continued. "The news hounds have a copy of my death certificate from Kansas City."

His eyes widened, "Already? But it's been less than a day!"

Nodding confirmation, "I know. Probably the DA had something to do with it. All I know is that things could get rather interesting for me in the very near future and I don't want to be stuck in here when they happen. I want to be outside where I have a chance of trying to clear my name. I'm sure there's someone in KC that can come up with proof that the original me was down there."

Seeing he wasn't going to be able to dissuade me from my decision he grabbed the chair and sat down. "Let's say I do release you tomorrow. Where will you go? What will you do for money?"

I had him; it was just a matter of making him comfortable with it. "Zig Zag has agreed to put me up in an apartment that they keep for out of town talent. She said it wouldn't be used for the next month or so. That gives me a place. As for money, Zig Zag has offered me work," holding up my hand to stop him, "that WON'T require me being in front of the camera."

## Chapter 20

Smiling he understood. I had been fighting that battle from the beginning and would probably be fighting it for a long time.

He sat there for a little while thinking, and then finally surrendered. "Fine, I will arrange for your release tomorrow. Have someone here to pick you up. In the mean time, I'll be back with a pair of crutches so that you can practice walking."

As he stood up to leave, I took the notebook out. "Hey doc, here." Handing it back, I saw him take it gently in his hands, as if it were a fragile item that would shatter. "You had better hold on to that. I have a feeling it wouldn't be safe around me."

As he left the room I opened up the magazine. That was one battle down and who knows how many I had yet to fight.

I had a sinking feeling that I was going to get the raw end of the stick from Der Uber Furer and there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it.

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Convincing the captain that he should be allowed to do direct research in Kansas City, Michael had been more than happy to agree not to charge the department for travel time in exchange for use of an unmarked vehicle. On the seat next to him was his briefcase with one copy of the folder he had made. The other had been locked in a strongbox at his house. If anything happened to either official set of documents, he should still have a good copy as a backup.

As he pulled out of the station he felt the anticipation build towards the eleven hour drive.

Something very fishy was going on here, and he was going to find out what it was.

# Chapter 21

Make a run for the border.

After taking care of my morning necessities, I used my crutches to walk back over to the bed. Climbing back in, I picked up the phone David had given me; flipping it open I turned it on. Time to reach out and touch someone. Selecting the number for the ZZ Studios I hit dial.

A female voice answered, "ZZ Studios how may I direct your call?"

"Yes, I would like to speak to Zig Zag please."

"I'm sorry, but Zig Zag is not in the office yet, is this an emergency?"

"Well, yes and no. Do you know if she can be reached on her car or home phone?"

"I'm sorry, I'm not allowed to give that information out. Is there a message I can take?"

So much for anonymity, "This is Arden."

There was a pause, "Are you on the cell phone?"

Very smart girl, "Yes I am."

"Please hang up, I'll call you right back."

Hitting the disconnect button, I waited for about twenty seconds until the phone rang. "Hello."

"Hi. I'm sorry, but I've had a couple of people call claiming to be you, Zig Zag's at home right now."

"All right, thank you. I'll give her a call there."

"OK. I hope you're feeling better. We're all pulling for you here."

Nice to know I had friends, "Thanks a lot. I hope to be seeing everyone soon."

Saying the usual parting prattle, I disconnected. Selecting Zig Zag's home number, I hit the connect button.

After about five rings, I hear a click, "What!" It was a speakerphone.

Uh oh. Sounds like I interrupted something, "Ummm Zig Zag?"

A sigh of exasperation could be heard, "Yah, who is this?"

"This is Arden. Look, if you're busy, I'll call back later."

I heard her scuffle to pick the phone up, "No! Don't! It's all right! You just caught me in the shower. How are you?"

Whew. For a second I thought she might have been practicing aerobics, with James. "I'm doing fine. In fact, I wanted to let you know that I'll be getting out today."

## Chapter 21

I could hear the surprise as the bomb dropped. "What? How can that be? It's been less than a week since the accident!"

Smiling at her confusion, "I know, but the doctor and I have discussed it. The episode I had yesterday morning shouldn't happen again. Also there's a concern about my safety with the news that got out. Before the hounds were just interested in me. Now they will be after me with a vengeance."

Not taking my word for it, she continued to argue, "But what about your leg? Should you be up yet? And how can you be sure you won't have another attack?"

I really shouldn't, "Remember that little trick you did with my tail?"

I could almost feel her hesitate, "Yes, I remember, what about it?"

I almost didn't want to tell her, "Well according to the doctor, laying on my stomach so long isn't good for my genus. My lungs couldn't bring in air properly. Since my heart was already taxed trying to pump blood while compressed it couldn't quite handle it when the adrenaline hit me from the shock. Assuming you aren't planning to pull that on me again, I think we're safe."

She didn't want to give up, "What about your other injuries? The leg, your ribs and your concussion?"

Taking a deep breath, I tried again, "The doc agrees that I can go. I may not be healed, but I'm not bad enough off to require bed rest. He was only keeping me here as a precaution. I promise Zig Zag, get me out of here and I be a good little bear."

I listened as she thought about it on the other end. Finally she spoke, "OK. I'll arrange to have you picked up by someone from the studio. Call the receptionist and let her know when you'll be getting out. And Arden, I want you to answer one question for me and I want an honest answer. If you don't and I find out later, I'll have your balls for lunch."

Ouch! "I can only try Zig Zag. I promise to give as honest an answer as I possibly can."

She didn't sound entirely satisfied, "Were you responsible for the accident and death of whoever that was in Kansas City?"

DOH! I was, but I wasn't!!! How the hell do I answer it without blowing things? "Zig Zag, if I am somehow responsible, I swear I'm unaware of it. I'm starting to remember some stuff, but I honestly don't know anything about that accident or the guy in it." A stretch, true, but if you think I really didn't know about him or the accident.

She didn't sound satisfied, but apparently she'd go along with it, "I'll accept that, for now, " and with that she hung up.

The last thing I ever wanted was to get on Zig Zag's bad side. In this world, that would be a fate almost worse than death!

What else could go wrong?



## Chapter 21

As I turned off the phone, the door opened. Looking over I saw Sheila carrying a couple of shopping bags.

As I sat up, a smile crossed my face from ear to ear! "Sheila!"

She came over and set the bags down on the end of the bed. Blocking my view of one, she turned towards me, holding something behind her back. "You gave us quite a scare you know."

Damn, that's right! She had been in the picture on the TV with that detective and the doctor after the resuscitation. "Yah, sorry about that. You could say that Zig Zag put me in a hard position and the detective just pushed me over the edge."

She gave me an odd look, trying to figure out what I was talking about. Time to change the subject, "But hey, I'm just fine OK? No sweat! I promise. I'm even getting out today!"

Nodding she smiled, "That's great news!"

She lowered her head and became a little more serious, "When I left the other day, I wasn't sure I ever wanted to see you again. What you said," pausing to find the words, "what you said scared me."

I wanted to reach out to her and make her understand that I never meant to scare her, but before I could screw up the courage she continued, "I've had 'fans' that were a little overzealous in their admiration for me. What you said reminded me of one of them." Seeing the look on my face she took my hand with her free one and continued, "I understand that you said what you did not because you were some fan with a fantasy," Little did she know, eh? "But because of what happened and how it made you feel. I promise, I'll try not to run away any more, OK?" As she finished, I watched as her eyes searched for an answer in mine.

As I looked into those piercing green eyes it was all I could do to reply, "I want you to understand, when I said I could never harm you, or never allow you to come to harm, I meant that with all my heart."

Looking down, to break contact with her eyes before I screwed up again, "You know nothing about me other than the fact that my head is harder than the door of a 98 Mercedes."

Having the appropriate effect on the mood, she chuckled a little. Smiling I squeezed her hand, "I don't know how things are going to turn out with this death certificate thing. Nor do I know if I'll ever be able to tell you about my life before we met. But if you don't mind, I think I'd enjoy getting to know you better and would appreciate it if you would help me get my new life going."

She smiled, and got a particularly impish look to her eyes, "All right, but only on one condition."

Oh-Kay, what's she got in mind now? Watching her wearily I bit, "All right, state your condition."

## Chapter 21

From behind her back she brought forth the biggest damned spiked collar I had ever seen. She could almost use it for a belt. Smiling she dangled it out in front of me. "Philippe told me about his 'work of art', so I picked up a little fashion accessory for you." Dropping it in my lap, she folded her arms and smiled, waiting for me to do something.

Pursing my lips, I nodded, picked up the collar and tried to put it on. After a couple of attempts, I finally got the catch to hold. Leaning back, I crossed my arms, cocked an eyebrow and waited for her decision.

Leaning forward she grabbed the long fur on the top of my shoulders and yanked me forwards, before I could react I discovered that I was being kissed by a very foxy lady. As she released me I fell back against the bed, the spikes punching holes in the pillow. Trying to get a grip on the situation I blinked a few times. "What was that for!"

Reaching behind her for a bag, she laughed, "If you're going to hang around with me, you're going to have to learn to loosen up. You were so tight you probably couldn't get out of bed without taking the mattress without you."

As she brought the bag around, she dumped the contents on my lap. It was clothes. She had been shopping for clothes. And unless she was planning on becoming a co-joined twin, then they were for me.

As she starting holding stuff up to me I felt a sense of dread as I realized that I had just been promoted from some obsessive fan to a dress-up toy.

Listening to her talk as she showed me the combinations she had picked out, I slowly realized that maybe being a toy wouldn't be that bad at all.

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James checked the clock. Mr. Khansman would be getting to his office in a couple of minutes. Washing out the cup, James poured some fresh coffee and added exactly one and a half teaspoons of sugar. As he was stirring the mixture, he heard the fax machine by his desk answer. Quickly putting the cup on a tray along with two unglazed donuts he walked over to his fax. Checking the cover page, he smiled. More brownie points were going to come his way.

While the fax was being printed, he saw Mr. Khansman exit the elevator and go into his office, closing the door behind him. Looking at the fax James's face slowly fell at what he read. His sudden victory was turning into a disaster. Removing the fax from the machine he laid it on the platter and walked towards the DA's door. Pausing to gather his courage, he knocked lightly on the door, and then peeked in.

His boss smiled at him. He would have been relieved if it hadn't been such a predatory smile. "Come in James."

Swallowing, James entered the room and closed the door. Approaching the desk, he put the coffee and donuts on the desk in front of his boss. Looking at the paper still on the platter, he finally said, "I'm afraid I have some bad news sir."

## Chapter 21

Having just finished taking a sip of his coffee, Daniel set the cup down and leaned back in his chair, "And just what would that be James?"

Taking the fax from the platter he set it on the desk in front of his boss. "I had a friend from law school who works at the capital in Topeka pull up all the information he could on the dead man."

His eyes closing into slits, Daniels glared at James. Swallowing James continued, "The dead man was not *Ursus maritimus*, but rather *Ursus arctos middendorffi*."

Closing his eyes, Daniel spoke slowly, "In English please, James."

Looking rather sheepish, "Our man is a polar bear, the one in Kansas City was a Kodiak, a sub-member of the Grizzly species."

Sighing, Daniel picked up the fax and began to examine it. "This is a most unfortunate turn of events James. I am most disappointed."

James KNEW he was cat food, "I'm sorry sir."

Tossing the papers back on his desk, he picked up his coffee again, "That will be all James."

As he left the room, James kissed any hopes of a quick promotion good bye.

After the door closed, Daniel took out a cell phone, hitting an auto-dial number he listened.

A grumpy voice answered, "Do you have ANY idea what time it is?"

Letting out a little growl he replied, "I know EXACTLY what time it is."

The voice on the other end became very attentive, "I'm sorry, I didn't know it was you."

Turning to look out the window, "I need a favor."

"Yah, sure. Whatever you need."

"You know about that white fool that's been all over the TV?"

"Sure, who don't?"

"I need him removed from the scene."

"I'll get my boys right on it."

Smiling, Khansman disconnected the call, confident that his contacts would eliminate the problem.

# Chapter 22

He who hesitates is lost.

After going through the contents of the two bags that Sheila had brought me, we decided on a white pair of swimming trunks that would be almost invisible under my fur, and a bright red U-shirt that would show off the fur on my shoulders and back. After putting them on, I stood in the bathroom doorway, modeling them for her.

Leaning around me to check out the look from all side she gave a nod of approval. "That looks good on you. Philippe sure did a good job! That guy sure can come up with some pretty exotic looks."

Chuckling in agreement I hobbled over to the bed, not bothering with the crutches. The leg hurt to walk on, but it wasn't the intense pain it was before. As I sat down, Sheila came over with a puzzled look on her face, "Doesn't it hurt to walk on?"

Bobbing my head to the side a little, "Sure it does, but it's not as bad as you think. I've got a pretty high tolerance for pain."

"But aren't you worried about re-injuring it? Walking without the crutches has got to be hard on it, right?"

Nodding, "Yah, it's not the best thing to do to it, but then again if I were smart I probably wouldn't have been out in the middle of the road Sunday night either."

Just then the door opened and Dr. Grahl came in, followed by an orderly pushing a wheelchair.

"Ah, there you are my boy. The nurses said Sheila was in here with you, so I figured it would be a good time to wheel you out. Nice outfit. You ARE wearing more than just a shirt, right?"

Laughing I decided not to let him off the hook, "Gee doc? Do you think I really need to?"

Chuckling himself he replied, "Personally I don't care. After you leave the hospital you are no longer our responsibility." Turning to Sheila, "Where did you park my dear?"

Picking up the bags so we could go, "I'm in the basement. The security guard let me park on the employee only level by the service elevator." Giggling a little she continued, "Apparently he's a BIG fan of mine."

Grabbing the phone from the desk, I hopped over to the wheelchair and sat down. Handing me a clipboard, the doc grabbed my crutches. "You will need to sign that my boy, next to the big red X on each page."

As I got ready to sign my name, I realized I didn't know what name to use... Just automatically signing my regular name could have blown my cover with Sheila and the orderly. "Ummm.. What name do I sign doc?"

## Chapter 22

Surprised for a second, he quickly recovered, "You told me the other day your name was Arden Nanuk, so that's what I put on the papers. You can either sign that or John Doe. It's up to you."

Sounded reasonable; quickly signing "Arden Nanuk" on all the pages, I traded the clipboard to the doc for my crutches. Satisfied, that everything was in order, we all headed down to Sheila's car.

While in the elevator the doctor took out a business card. "This has my office, cell, pager and home phone numbers. If you feel the need, please call me." Taking the card, I opened the cell phone. Placing the card inside I closed the cover. It would be safe in there until I could program the phone.

As we exited the elevator I got my first look at Sheila's car. I had the distinct feeling that I'd have to break both legs again to fit into it. As Sheila pointed her key chain at it, the shiny red Corvette chirped. Smiling Sheila went over to the car and popped the trunk. "Just a second guys, and I'll make some room. Placing the clothes bags back in the trunk, she left it open and walked around to the passenger side. Climbing in briefly, she soon got out and took off the hard top off the car and rolled down the window. Leaning against the hard top, she made a sweeping motion to indicate that it was ready for me.

As she put the top in the trunk, the orderly wheeled me around to the car. After helping me up I took one look at the passenger seat and realized that it was now not only four feet below my butt, but it also would be virtually impossible to get my leg in the door.

Looking at the doctor, he only smiled and watched.

Reconsidering my options, I went for it. Climbing in, I found that by bending my left leg up almost to my chest I could sit into the seat almost comfortably. Turning, I shoved myself halfway into the drivers seat. Signaling to the orderly, I got him to lift my leg up, close the door, and then propped it in the window. Sliding back over into the passenger seat I found that my butt almost fit between the console and the door while my head stuck a good thirteen inches out the roof. Handing me the crutches the orderly backed away to watch what I would do now. One leg hanging out the window at about a forty-five degree angle, I turned one of the crutches around and hooked the end of the cast with it. Pulling on the crutch, I lifted the leg slightly and swung it closer in towards the car. Even at its closest point, my foot stuck out about 2 feet, and my knee was almost even with my chin. Leaning to the left and twisting a little, I managed to find a position where I could breathe while at the same time giving Sheila enough room to steer. I'm just glad it wasn't a stick or she would have had to tie me to the roof.

Looking over at Sheila, who was standing by the driver's side door, I said over my shoulder, "Do me a favor, pretend you're driving a Cadillac will you? I don't need this thing broken again."

Climbing in, she started up the car. Grinning from ear to ear, she tossed the doc a kiss and backed out.

During the ride to the studio I tried to remember if I had ever been as scared.

## Chapter 22

I failed.

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Stepping out of the stairway on the third floor, the nurse walked down to room 303. Making sure that nobody was looking she stepped quickly inside. Turning to the bed she stopped dead in her tracks.

There was nobody in the room; not only that, the bed had been made and everything had been prepared for the next person who might need the room. Cursing to herself, she quickly left the room. Heading down to the records room, she waved at the attendant behind the counter. After he buzzed her through the door, she walked back to one of the available computer terminals.

Damn all the luck, he had been signed out almost an hour ago. Reading on, she saw that he had been transported to a private healthcare facility, there was no name listed. Checking to make sure there had been no admissions that day, she shut down the terminal.

Her boss wasn't going to like this. Waving again to the attendant on the way out, she headed quickly to her car, trying to think of how to break the news to her boss.

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Walking down the hallway, Michael was looking for the Coroner's office. Finally finding it, he walked in, and as he approached the secretary's desk, he took out his badge. Turning from the keyboard, the secretary raised an eyebrow and asked, "May I help you with something?"

Flipping the badge open, he showed it to her, "I'm Detective Jones from the Columbus Police Department, I'm here to speak with the Coroner."

Smiling, she nodded, "One moment, I'll let him know you're here." Picking up the phone, she dialed a number and spoke, 'Sir, there's a Detective Jones here from Columbus. Yes sir, I'll let him know.'" Placing the phone in the cradle, she looked back at the detective, "He's currently in the morgue. Go through that door," pointing to a door behind her, "Follow the hallway to the first door on your right, He's expecting you."

Tipping an imaginary hat, Michael proceeded to the morgue. Upon opening the door, he was hit with a variety of smells, most of them not at all pleasant. Looking in, he saw a Hyena sitting at one of the tables, a partially uncovered corpse on it. Catching his eye, he proceeded over to the table. As he approached, the doctor quickly tossed a brown chunk of meat into his mouth and wiped his hands on his smock. Coming around the table he held it out to Jones. Swallowing back the rising bile, Jones took his hand and shook it. Soon as the doctor released it, he surreptitiously wiped it on his leg. 'Good lord, I knew Hyena's were carrion eaters, but there's got to be a rule about eating ones customers,' he thought to himself.

As the doctor sat back down, he again picked up some meat. Popping it into his mouth, he chewed it a couple of times and swallowed. "Would you like some liver? I've got plenty here."

## Chapter 22

Once again fighting the urge to vomit, Jones gave a neutral smile, "No thank you, I'll pass."

Shrugging, the Hyena popped another strip into his mouth, "Your choice, however I must tell you, my wife makes a WONDERFUL marinated calf's liver that, in my humble opinion, can't be beat." Seeing the perplexed look on Michael's face, the doctor suddenly roared with laughter, having to grab onto the table, to prevent his falling onto the floor.

Not getting the joke, Michael just crossed his arms and waited for the doctor to recover.

Getting some measure of control, the doctor took one look at the young detective and lost it again. After a few seconds more he managed to recover, still laughing, "You didn't REALLY think that I was eating something from in here did you?"

Walking closer to the cadaver laying on the table, he saw that the doctor had placed some cloth over an exposed section of the table and set his lunch on it, the paper bag folded neatly to the side.

Feeling rather sheepish Michael smiled too, realizing just how absurd that concept had been. "I'm glad you could see me now, I appreciate you interrupting your meal to see me."

Finishing up the last of the meat, the doctor crumpled up the bag it had been in, and deposited it in a trash can near the table. "Not a problem, really, I was just about finished anyway. Why don't we go into my office where I have all the records."

Leading Michael into his office, he gestured for the detective to take a seat. Pulling a file from his filing cabinet, he sat back at the desk. "All right, what do you need me to tell you about Mr. Bearridge?"

Opening his brief case, Michael took out his notepad, "We've got a bit of a problem in Columbus. At approximately the same time that Mr. Bearridge was killed here in Kansas City, we had a man struck in Columbus. When I ran his fingerprints yesterday, they came up as a match with your corpse."

Opening the folder, the doctor pulled out a copy of the official records that had been sent from Topeka. Having lived in Olathe, Kansas, all the information came from the Kansas capital. The doctor glanced to make sure all the papers were there and handed them to the young detective.

Flipping through the papers, Michael reviewed the information that he knew. Coming across the drivers licensing page he froze. The pictures didn't match!

Seeing him pause, the doctor asked, "What is it?"

Looking up at the doctor, Michael answered while still trying to digest the information, "This here says that you're corpse was *Ursus arctos middendorffi*, right?"

Nodding, the doctor confirmed it in his copy.

## Chapter 22

"Our man is Ursus maritimus. They don't look anything alike." Seeing the disbelief on the coroners face, he passed his folder over to him. "Two different people, different genus of the same phylum with identical first names and fingerprints."

Reading the medical reports from Columbus, the hyena was amazed, "The fur was pigment-less, so it's not just a bleach job. Good lord man, do you understand what this means?"

Nodding, Michael couldn't reply. The impossible had happened. When not believing in impossible things, one must seek the absurd for a solution. One way or another, he was going to get to the bottom of this, even if it killed him.

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DA Daniel Khansman was not a happy man. Shutting his eyes, he tried to resist destroying the cell phone in his hand. "How could he be gone, he was almost dead yesterday!"

The voice on the other end rapidly answered, "I don't know Daniel, according to my girl, he was gone and the room cleaned up. She checked with central records and they showed he had been transferred to a private facility earlier that morning. She even checked that day's admissions to ensure they didn't just move him and change the name."

In a low voice he barely controlled his anger, "This is unacceptable. He must be dealt with, and before that detective gets back from Kansas City to clear his name. I want to see his obit' on the news tonight, do you understand me?"

Hastily, the vice replied, "All right Daniel, like I said, I got people looking for this guy. How hard can it be to hide a walking snowball anyway? I said I'd take care of it and I will."

Disconnecting the phone, he calmly folded it up and replaced it inside his jacket. Leaning back, he again looked out the window.

After considering the possibilities he took out the phone and made another call. It was time to bring in some experts.

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Pulling up to the front of ZZ Studios, Sheila turned off the key and looked over at me, "Well, we're here. What do you think of it?"

Staring at the sign, I couldn't believe that I was actually at ZZ studios. This was a trip.

After about a minute, Sheila got out and walked around the car, looking down she asked, "Well? Are you going to get out or what?"

Looking up at her I gave a weak smile, "Sure, just as soon my hands un-spasm I'll be glad to try to get out."

Growling she reached out and opened the door. Not being ready for it, I practically gave myself another concussion trying to dive under the T in the roof. Not quite clearing it, I



folded over the console with my head in the drivers seat, holding onto the soft spot with my hand. I suppose that it's actually a good thing since the pain was enough that when I tried to pull right leg in, I only succeeded in dislodging it from it's precarious place on the edge of the door and having it hit the ground like a ton of bricks. Screeching in horror at what she had done, Sheila half climbed into the car on top of me. If there had been a little more room, I do think she would actually have tried to get all the way over. "Oh my god! I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! Oh god, are you all right!?"

Waiting for the stars to clear I tried to take a deep breath, however the combination of Sheila on me and the console underneath was making breathing rather hard. Remembering the last time I had been in a similar position, I put all my strength into my left arm and pushed myself up, unceremoniously dumping Sheila out of the car. Gasping for breath I finally was able to say, "Sorry babe, but I couldn't breathe with you pinning me down like that."

Scrambling to her feet, she picked up my crutches and waited for me to try to extricate myself from the car. Once again climbing half way into the driver's seat I was able to get my left leg out of the glove compartment they call a floorboard and out the door. After that it was a simple matter of standing up.

Once I was vertical, I looked down on Sheila while feeling around on my head for the bump. Grimacing I shook my head, "How many times in one week does a guy have to avoid dying before you girls stop abusing him?"

Her entire face drooped at this. Unable to stay mad at her, I leaned down and kissed her on the forehead, "Don't sweat it. I only swore never to hurt you. That doesn't mean I'm not willing to take a little abuse from you. Just try to take it easy on me, ok? I just got out of the hospital you know. "

Smiling at that, she closed the door to the car. "I know. I was there."

Walking through the front entrance to the building, I was hit by a blast of cool air. It felt wonderful after having been in a mobile fur drier for the last twenty minutes. Looking around I saw a pleasantly furnished lobby, with the receptionist sitting behind a low counter. There were a couple of plush chairs and a large couch, one even I could lay down on. Looking on the walls, I saw numerous pictures of movie posters, presumably from past projects. There were also pictures of various cast members on the wall near the receptionist.

As I stood there, Sheila confirmed that Zig Zag was in her office with the receptionist. Wanting to surprise her with my presence, Sheila talked her into not warning Zig Zag that I was coming. As we headed back into the studios, Sheila pointed out the sound stages where they did the shoots, the video editing room, props, etc. Finally coming almost full circle we came to an open room. Peeking around the corner, Sheila held up a finger in front of her face to indicate that I should be quiet. Stepping into the doorway, she knocked, "Hey boss, you busy?"

I heard Zig Zag put down some papers, "Not at all Sheila, come on in. You're sure in a good mood today."

## Chapter 22

Hearing leather rubbing together, I presumed that Sheila had sat, "Yep. I met someone I want you to talk to about a job. This guy is DEFINITELY ZZ material, 100%."

Intrigued, Zig Zag replied, "Sounds good, does he have any acting experience?"

"I'm not sure about acting, and the guy is a bit squeaky, but given enough time and encouragement I think we could loosen him up. He's definitely got the right stuff for the job and a great personality."

I could hear a hum, as Zig Zag considered it, "Sounds like a possibility, bring him by some time and I'll give him a look over."

Totally innocent, Sheila asked, "He's here now, should I bring him in?"

I could here a twinge of bewilderment in Zig Zag's voice, "Now? Well I guess so. Kind of short notice, but as long as he's here, no problem."

Hearing the leather scrunch again, Sheila came over to the door, reaching out she grabbed me, "Zig Zag, here's your new star." Pulling me into the room, I managed to navigate through the doorway without tripping over my crutches.

It took a second for Zig Zag to figure out what she was seeing. When she finally realized it was me she smiled and stood up. "Arden. I'm glad to see you. I thought you were going to let us know when you were going to get out so I could have someone pick you up! I don't know how in the world you got in that car of hers." Gesturing to the couch, she indicated that I should sit.

Managing to sit down without totally surrendering to gravity on the way, I propped the crutches on the wall next to me. "Actually I didn't know I was getting out right then. Sheila came by to bring me some clothes. When the doctor found out about it he went ahead and brought up an orderly and the paperwork to check me out. Couple of signatures, a brief ride in a wheel chair, five minutes with a crowbar and a shoehorn and I was in Sheila's car getting a ride here."

With the mention of a shoehorn, Sheila reached across the couch and hit me in the arm, hard. "Ouch woman! Stop abusing me or I'll tell Zig Zag how you almost put me back in the hospital outside."

Seeing the consternation on Zig Zag's face, I quickly continued, "It was nothing really, just a minor concussion and an attempted pulled groin muscle. Nothing major."

Shaking her head, she smiled. "Nice fashion accessory you've got there by the way. It accents your fur job nicely."

Looking down at the shirt, I gave Zig Zag a quizzical look, at which point she made a motion with her finger, as if loosening a collar. I had forgotten the darned thing. "Yah, that was Sheila's idea. Revenge for the scare that I put into her yesterday." Chuckling, it occurred to me, "Who knows, maybe it will act as a good luck charm and keep me from getting into any more trouble."

Smiling at that Zig Zag leaned back, "Do you want something to drink? Some water, or soda maybe?" Seeing me shake my head she became all business. "I know I promised you the use of our apartment while you got back on both feet. There's a bit of a problem with that. We've got a video coming up with Bjorn Otterson that was supposed to take place next month. Due to a timing conflict he's got with a large-scale studio film that's been moved up, we had to move our shooting schedule up also. I'm afraid that he'll be needing the apartment on Monday, and that doesn't really leave much time for us to find you a place."

Running through the back of my mind, I could hear a line from a comedy bit called Star Trek, "Warning, this is a plot complication. Warning, this is a plot complication."

Banging my head against the wall gently, I asked myself what else could go wrong. That's when Sheila piped up, "You know, he could stay at my Condo. I've got that spare bedroom I never use, he could stay in there." Why do I keep asking for it?

Zig Zag shook her head, "No, I'll ask around, one of the guys should probably be able to let him bunk with them for a while."

Not one to give up, "No, really! I'd like the company, besides someone needs to keep an eye on him. Plus it will give me a chance to show him around town this weekend too." Leaning forward, she gave a loud conspiratorial whisper, "I might actually get him to loosen up a little too."

Chucking, Zig Zag just shook her head. "OK. If that's what you want, that's what you got, assuming it's all right with Arden."

I had a choice in the matter? I took one look at the mischievous glint in Sheila's eyes and knew I was probably going to regret this. "With the choice of bunking with some guy I don't know, and shacking up with Sheila, I guess I'll take the latter of the two evils." Looking at Sheila, I put one stipulation on the deal, "Assuming, that is, that she promises not to inflict any more injuries on me for the rest of the weekend"

Straightening up, She crossed her heart, 'I promise, no more pain for the rest of the weekend." As I nodded, she added, "Come Monday, the kid gloves are off though."

One of these days I'm going to have to use a full-length mirror to check for a brand mark, just to reassure myself I wasn't really an overstuffed toy.

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After getting a more in depth tour of the facilities, and introductions all around, Sheila was anxious to get me back to her apartment. I think she wanted to play dress-up on me some more. Fortunately Zig Zag offered to have Clarence drive me over. His Saturn was big enough that I could sit in the back and stretch my leg out, even if I would be short of headroom.

Clarence was holding the door open for Sheila and I as we exited the building. Turning to thank him I saw an old, late model 80's car making a hard turn into the parking lot from the street. As the driver turned, he accelerated while someone in the back seat

## Chapter 22

leaned out the window. Watching the guy in the back window, I saw him bring out something in his right hand. Having lived in the no-man's part of Dallas, I knew what was coming. Grabbing Sheila and Clarence, I forgot about the crutches and tackled them to the sidewalk, my back to the attackers.

On the way down, I saw glass shattering in the windows behind us as we fell, racing us to the ground. Hitting hard on my left shoulder, I tried to curl up so as to cover the other two. After a few seconds, I became aware that the shooting had stopped, and heard the car cut back out into the street, accelerating away,

Releasing Clarence and Sheila, I got on my hands, or rather paws and knee and moved away from the glass, looking to make sure that they didn't have any holes in them. Satisfied by the lack of blood on their clothes, I picked up one of my crutches and leveraged myself up into a standing position. Doing so I felt sharp pain in my shoulders, probably from the falling glass; enough of it had fallen off of me when I stood up.

Reaching down a hand I helped the other two up as people started streaming out of the building. Seeing Zig Zag in the middle of the crowd, I watched as she pushed her way to the front, "What the hell happened out here?"

Looking down the street where the car had gone, I neither saw nor heard it, they were long gone. Sheila was carefully picking glass out of her fur as she answered, "Some guys in an old car sprayed down the front of the building as we came out." Gesturing to me, "Arden grabbed me and Clarence and tackled us. If it weren't for him we might have been hit."

Accepting my other crutch from one of the actors that had come out, I saw Zig Zag glower at me for a second, and then started herding folk back into the building. As I watched, I looked at the damage. They had hit both main windows and the door as well as stitched a pattern of shots in a declining line from about chest height down to knee height, obviously tracking downward as we dove for cover. Looking inside I saw the back wall of the foyer was riddled with bullets. It was a miracle that nobody on the sound stage beyond had been hurt.

Carefully trying to avoid stepping on broken glass, I used my crutches to vault me past the worst part of the breakage. Although Sheila had gotten me clothes, shoes were another matter, and I didn't have any calluses to speak of yet. Getting past the glass I walked over to where Zig Zag stood leaning on the counter. Giving me a sideways glare, I could tell that I held the blame for whatever happened.

Seeing that there was no way I'd change her mind right now, I walked over, grabbed a foot stool and squatted down on it, I figured that as long as I had to wait on the cops, I might as well get comfortable.

I heard Sheila and Clarence come back in, walking carefully on the glass. Coming over to me, Sheila put her arms around my shoulders and was about to kiss me when she saw me wince. "Hey, are you OK?"

## Chapter 22

Nodding, "Yah. Most of the glass from the windows landed on my shoulders and back. I think I got stuck with some of it."

Reaching around me, Sheila gently ran her fingers over my shoulder. Her eyes widened and as she pulled back her paw, you could see the crimson color of blood. Observing this Zig Zag walked around behind me. Seeing that blood covered a fairly large area of my back, she watched for a second. Not seeing the pattern grow, she was satisfied that I wouldn't bleed to death. Seeing the look on Sheila's face, Zig Zag decided to cut me some slack.

"OK, take him back to the spa and have him lay down on the table back there. I'll get the first aid kit."

Leading me round to the backside of the building, Sheila took me into a room we had just blown by on the first run. Inside was a large Jacuzzi set into the floor, some free weights, a workout station and a massage table. On one wall, there was a set of kitchen cabinets with a sink and a refrigerator next to it. On the other side I saw a doorway that led to what appeared to be a room with some lockers and showers. For a second I was about to ask if it was a Men's or Women's shower before I remembered where I was.

Leading me over to the table, Sheila indicated I should take off my shirt and get up on it. She then went over to get some washrags and a basin of water from the cabinet and set them down on the table next to me.

Cautiously, Sheila began picking glass out of my fur, occasionally pulling pieces out that had actually been stuck in, rather than just tangled. I was thankful for the fact that I've got thick skin and a good tolerance for pain or I'd have been really hurting. As it was, the adrenaline was starting to wear off, and I was beginning to feel some of the damage. About this time Zig Zag came in with a large first aid kit.

As they continued to pull glass out, each time they found one that stuck in, they would hit the area with iodine. Personally I would have preferred they leave the glass in. Continuing to work, Zig Zag finally spoke, "I'm sorry for being mad at you Arden, I know it wasn't your fault. Thank you for taking care of Sheila and Clarence."

Wincing at some more iodine, I reminded myself to buy stock in the stuff. The way these girls were slopping it around, I could make a tidy profit. "Don't worry about it Zig Zag, like I told Sheila, I'd never allow any of you to come to harm." Positioning my arms under my shoulders to take some load off of my chest I took a deep breath. "Not as long as I have anything to say about it anyway."

Sounding distracted, Zig Zag replied, "That's nice." Probing around in one area low on my back, I heard her take in a sudden breath, and then heard Sheila squeak out, "My god! That's a bullet hole!"

Gritting my teeth as she probed around the hole I heard Sheila again, "Look, there's another one over here, and down here too. My god, we need to call an ambulance."

## Chapter 22

Cursing my luck I let my head drop to the tabletop. And I thought I hated hospitals BEFORE I came to this world!

# Chapter 23

What once was lost, but now is found.

A knock on the door caused Daniel to look up from the case folder he was examining. As he watched, James stuck in his head and, seeing that his boss wasn't busy entered, closing the door behind him. From the look on his face, the news would be very interesting.

Leaning back, he waited for James to speak.

"I got a call from a friend at County General Hospital, it seems that there was a drive-by shooting out at ZZ Studios and Arden Nanuk was hit. Apparently he was hit no less than five times in the back."

Smiling, Khansman replied, "Very interesting news."

Fighting to maintain eye contact, James hesitantly continued, "However, the injuries aren't severe. Due to his physique, it looks like the bullets didn't penetrate the muscle. There's a good possibility that he may even be released tonight."

Closing his eyes, his lips became a tight line, the only outward sign he allowed James to see of his displeasure. Getting control he finally dismissed James.

How could the fools have been so stupid? Returning to the folder he put the problem in the back of his mind until he heard from his associate.

\*\*\*\*\*

I was back at County General again. This time, laying face down in the ER while they checked out my back. The ER Doctor and I had come to an agreement after I had threatened to refuse medical attention. They may have gotten me here, but legally they couldn't force me to accept their care. The agreement was that he'd go ahead and do a portable X-ray of my back, and check the glass cuts to ensure none needed stitches until such time as Dr. Grahl could take over.

Checking the X-Ray when it came back, he admitted that I wouldn't need surgery. The bullets had not penetrated the muscle layer and thus wouldn't need the surgery he was going to have me shaved for. Agreeing again that he wouldn't be cutting any fur, I granted him permission to go ahead and retrieve them using forceps. Despite the local anesthesia, it felt like the guy was probing around inside the wounds with a crowbar. Listening, I could hear the distinct metal sound as the ER Doctor dropped them into the metal pan.

After the fifth was pulled out, I tried to relax as he stapled each of the holes shut with a surgical staple. "All done" came the overly cheery voice. I was tempted to take the stapler and clip him a few times; fortunately he was saved by a familiar voice.

"Ah my boy, there you are. You should have let me know you were planning a visit and I would have been here." I heard the rumble of X-ray's as the doc put them up on the display. "Well, well, well. I heard about the shooting on the radio." Changing X-Ray's, "It looks like you lucked out my boy. None of them were near the spinal cord or penetrated very deep." Probing around on my back, I had the sensation of pressure without the being

## Chapter 23

able to tell directly where. 'It looks like he did a good job on you, the scars shouldn't be noticeable, but why in the world didn't he shave around the wounds?' he finished with a quiet, distracted voice.

Rumbling in a low voice I replied, "Because I told him I'd shave him from head to foot if he screwed up Philippe's work."

Coming around to squat in front of me, he sat down on a stool, "And people say I have a bad bedside manner. I'm sure the medical profession is rejoicing the fact that you're not a member."

Feeling a pinch in my arm as the nurse gave me a tetanus booster I replied, making sure she heard, "Who says I'm not? Hard to remember doc."

Standing up he patted me on the shoulder, "Don't worry my boy, the wounds aren't severe enough to require an overnight stay. As soon as someone can pick you up, I have no objection to signing you out."

As he got up to leave, I stopped him, "Hey Doc. Tell that other guy thanks for me, no hard feelings."

As he walked away I heard him chuckling.

\*\*\*\*\*

Having not heard back from his associates yet, Daniel decided it was time to call. Hitting the do-not-disturb button on his phone, he opened his cell phone and hit autodial.

"Hello?"

"Tony. How kind of you to take my call."

"Um, Daniel, I've been meaning to call you."

Dropping his voice an octave, Daniel growled, "I'm sure you have. Tell me Tony, do you specifically go out of your way to find idiots for my jobs, or are you going to say it's just bad luck?"

Tony tried to recover, "I don't understand Daniel, they hit the guy, radio said five shots in the back. I don't get how he can still be walking around."

Turning his chair back around towards the window, Daniel gave a sigh of exasperation. "Tony, this isn't some weasel or other small creature we're talking about. This is a bear. They are BIG, Tony. They have more than twice the muscle mass of any other species and a very thick skin, how ELSE do you think he could go head to head with a speeding Mercedes?"

"OK, I'll have my girl head back into the hospital, maybe she can hit him with a shot of something to take him out."



## Chapter 23

"My aid says that he's going to be released tonight, so don't count on that. You're best bet is to have her watch and see who picks him up, then have them followed to see where he goes. You can see about dealing with him later."

Turning off the phone, he pocketed it. It was so hard to find good help. If they didn't take care of it by time the professionals got in tomorrow, then Tony was going to be out of luck.

\*\*\*\*\*

Michael met with the Lenexa PD detective, to whom the case had been passed from the KCPD. As the detective opened the door to the dead man's apartment for him, they entered. The living room was packed with stuff. Big screen TV, Audio system, multiple video recorders/players of all types and several computers. Boxes lined one wall showing all kinds of computer name brands as well as miscellaneous stuff like Girl Scout Cookies.

The large Ferret sat down on the couch and asked, "So what's a Columbus cop doing down here on an auto-accident call?"

Sitting down at the desk, Michael moved the mouse, deactivating the screen-saver. "At the time your Arden Berridge died in a car wreck down here, a large ursine gentleman was struck by a car on the edge of Columbus." Clicking on the minimized browser he perused the page.

Putting his feet up on the coffee table, the local cop asked, "So, I still don't see the big deal."

"Our bear has amnesia, but remembered his first name as Arden." Slowly backing through the previous web pages, he saw that they were all about an on-line underground comic strip.

"I still don't see the big deal. Nice coincidence but so what?"

Getting back to the home page for the strip, Michael began perusing the page. "Our man has fingerprints that match those of your dead man." Interesting strip, kind of humorous too. That skunk looked like a looker too.

Dropping his feet to the floor, the other detective sat up, "Matching fingerprints? Then who was in the car?"

Seeing the strips related to Zig Zag studio, Michael replied in a distracted voice, "You're boy was a Kodiak, ours is a Polar." Interesting, Zig Zag was at this other guy's hospital room, very curious.

Not believing what he was hearing, "Wait a second, you're guy was a Polar? You sure it wasn't a bleach job?"

Nodding, Michael then minimized the browser and looked at the backdrop. It was Sheila Vixen, yet another coincidence that couldn't be ignored. Remembering the other detective's question, Michael set his briefcase on the desk and opened it up. Handing the folder to the detective, he again began checking files on the computer. Not finding

anything of interest, he looked around on the desk. Spotting a PDA he picked it up and began perusing it.

Letting out a low whistle, the detective read the file Michael had given him.

Examining the numbers in the PDA, Michael asked, "Did he have any relatives or a will?"

Shaking his head, the ferret looked up from the file, "Nope. Parents both dead, as are both brothers. Oldest was killed trying to rob a liquor store; the other was killed in action over in Iran. We checked his bank and he didn't have a safety deposit box. Also checked the people on his phone-list too. Nobody knows if he had a will."

Holding up the PDA Michael asked, "Is it possible for me to take this? I want to see if it gets any kind of a reaction out of him."

Making a note in his PDA, the detective nodded, "No problem. If nobody tries to claim the stuff in the next 30 days, then it gets hauled off to auction."

Placing the PDA in his briefcase Michael looked around, also taking some family photos and other personal items, he thanked the ferret for his assistance and headed back to Columbus. This time, when he tried for a reaction, he'd make sure that the guy wasn't laying on his stomach."

\*\*\*\*\*

Once again I was on the service elevator headed down to the basement, Dr. Grahl in tow. Upon exiting the elevator, I was relieved to see David standing next to a rather large limousine along with Zig Zag and someone else. It was a tall dog, dark snout with black tipped ears. He almost looked like a fox if it wasn't for the fact that the rest of his fur was gray with the exception of his paws and feet, which were white. Thinking for a second, it dawned that this must be the "James" that I had read about. The guy sure didn't look like a coyote!

Giving me a hand out of the wheel chair, the doctor commented, "Well my boy, it looks like you won't have to fold, spindle and mutilate your self getting into this vehicle." Not having my crutches, I accepted David and James's help over to the car while Zig Zag thanked the doctor. Climbing in the back, David extended a hand to help me in and directed me to the seat facing backwards, behind the driver. Sitting down, I started to ease back before I realized that he was handing me a large, fluffy pillow. Placing it behind my back, I slowly leaned back in the corner of the seat, propping my leg up on the rest of it. I thanked him for the help.

Shaking his head, David corrected me, "It's us who should be thanking you. If you hadn't tackled Sheila and Clarence, there is a good chance that one or more of the bullets you took would have hit them. I'm sure you've guessed by now that we aren't build quite as sturdy as you are." Reaching into the cold-bar, he listed off the items until I settled on a Guinness. Popping the top, he passed the bear a beer.

As I took a drink, I let it foam in my mouth for a second before swallowing, trying to formulate my response. "Don't be too sure you want to thank me. I have a feeling that the only reason we were shot at is that I was there."

By this time, Zig Zag and James had climbed in, and the door closed. I saw a glance pass between them when I said that. Continuing, I explained, "Just looking at the area I could see it's not a gang territory. The buildings have no graffiti, no bullet holes from previous shootings, and the glass on the front wasn't bulletproof. Besides, I seriously doubt Zig Zag would keep her studios in that kind of neighborhood anyway." Nodding to Zig Zag, "From talking to you and what I've heard about you, I didn't think you would be the kind of person to run a sweat shop." Taking another sip, "At least not with what I saw inside." Chuckling it occurred to me. "Hmmm... Maybe you could call it a sweat shop, I'm certain you're people do work up a bit of one under those lights."

I got the feeling that their smiles were polite. Trying to figure out why, I realized ANIMALS DON'T SWEAT! I knew this and forgot. Damned ideological screw-ups on my part were unacceptable.

Trying to recover, "Anyway, you all should think about distancing yourselves from me for a while. If someone IS after me, I don't want any of you caught in the middle."

Zig Zag glanced at David and James, to see how they looked. David was neutral; Zig Zag's the boss. James on the other hand gave a tiny nod, worried more about Zig Zag and her people than he was some guy he'd never met. Thinking for a second she decided, "No. We're not going to abandon you." Turning to David, she began dictating issues, "Until things settle down, I want security at the studio. Also have the windows replaced with bulletproof glass. This may have been caused because of Arden's arrival, but it's something we should have thought about before with all the threats we've gotten over the years. Also make sure that everyone has security systems at their places, if not we need to encourage them too. Also get a hold of Bull Dog security. I want their 'rabid' coverage for the studio, Sheila's and my place." Looking at James, "I hope you won't mind if I insist on you're staying at my place for a while?" Feigning indecision, James was startled by a shot to the ribs from Zig Zag. "That about covers it James. If I think of anything else, I'll call to mention it." Nodding, David finished writing up his notes and put the PDA away.

As he was putting the PDA away, his cell phone rang, "This is David." Listening to the phone he grunted a few times then finally, "Thank you, that's very useful. Keep on it."

Hanging up the phone, he smiled. "Very interesting news. It's about the man who died in Kansas City." Now sure he had everyone's attention, "As we all know, our boy here is an Ursus Meritimus, the man who died was an Ursus Arctos Middendorffi." Getting the blank stares he expected, "Arden here is Polar, the other guy was a Kodiak. There is no way that our Arden and the other are the same man."

Leaning my head back on the padding next to the window, I closed my eyes and smiled.

\*\*\*\*\*

Pulling into her garage, Sheila hopped out. Reaching into the passenger side, she took out Arden's crutches and the prescriptions that the doctor had called in for Arden. David

had called her while she was driving home and asked her to pick them up. Double-checking the bag, she saw that the antibiotics, pain blockers and special shampoo were all still in the bag. Heading inside, she put the crutches by the door, and tossed the meds on the table in the entryway.

Heading into her bedroom, she quickly made the bed and picked straightened things up a little. Going out into the living room, she rapidly straightened up the cushions on the couch and ditched a couple of magazines that were old. As she proceeded to the kitchen, she heard a honk outside. Seeing that she didn't have time to do the dishes, Sheila headed to the door. Taking Arden's crutches, she headed outside towards the waiting limo.

Climbing out of the car, I saw Sheila's smiling face holding my crutches. Reaching out for my crutches, I found myself holding onto Sheila as she ducked into my harms. Carefully she gave me a hug, her head laying against my chest, "I'm glad you're going to be all right. I was so worried when they took you away in an ambulance again."

Returning the hug, I kissed the top of her head, "Hey, it's OK. If you couldn't take me out with that kiddy car of yours, I promise that no punk with a pop gun is going to do it."

Standing back a little, she gave me a light shot to the ribs and handed me the crutches. Turning back to the others who were now standing outside of the car, "Thanks again. You have no idea how much this means to me. I don't know how I can' ever pay you back." Seeing Zig Zag raising a finger to answer I quickly amended, "Without going on film that is."

After a quick round of goodbyes, they climbed back into the limousine, and pulled away. Following Sheila into her condo, I managed to get up the steps despite my needing to use crutches.

Once inside I got a look around. The interior was pleasantly decorated; glancing into the living room, I saw a large, oversized couch and some comfortable chairs. The kitchen was off to the right just a past the entryway, with a counter that showed out into the combination living room and eating area. Moving further into the living room, I saw a set of stairs leading up, and another door leading to a room.

I heard the sound of dishes being done, followed by Sheila, "Hey, look around and make yourself at home. Since you're going to be here for a while, you might as well get comfortable."

Heading over to the doorway, I saw it led into a large master bedroom. Other doors were obviously for the closet and probably the bathroom. Looking up the stairs, I could see two doors on the right. Not interested in tackling the climb right now, I headed over to the couch. Sitting down at one end, I propped my right leg up and relaxed back. "Nice place you've got her Sheila, I take it that's the master bedroom over there?"

Looking out over the counter from the kitchen, she smiled, "Yep, and the bed's just as comfy as it looks too." These girls just don't give up. Leaning back, I felt a twinge from my back, but it quickly passed. As I lay there, I quietly sang Nanuk's healing song, until I finally drifted off to sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

The first thing that Sabrina noticed as she pulled into the parking lot, were the two cops standing in front of the door. No, they weren't cops, they were security guards, the guns had thrown her off for a second. The next thing she noticed was the missing glass from the front of the building. As she pulled into a parking spot, one of them walked over to her car. When she opened the door, he spoke, "Pardon me miss, but do you have business here?"

Surprised, Sabrina got her purse and stood up, "Yes I do, I work here. What happened?"

Nodding, he replied, "Really? Can't say as I've seen you're face before, are you new talent?"

Glaring at the Rent-a-cop, "I happen to be their graphics designer."

Realizing his mistake, he backpedaled quickly, "No offense miss, just making an observation."

Still steamed, Sabrina pushed by the guy and headed into the building, thinking to herself, "The nerve of some people."

\*\*\*\*\*

That mischievous glint in her eye again, she gave me a quick peck, "Dinner's ready if you're hungry." As if to confirm her suspicion, my stomach let out a rather loud growl. Looking down I glared at my stomach, "Hey! I can answer for my self if you don't mind."

Laughing, she helped me up. Ambling over to the table, I sat at the chair indicated. Inhaling I smelled garlic. Something Italian that hadn't been in a steamer for 2 hours before serving. I was having a hard time not drooling.

Sheila came out with two large plates. Setting one down in front of me, I saw what looked like Veal Parmesan and some angle hair pasta in Parmesan sauce with shrimp. A guy could get used to this kind of living. Pouring some wine in the glasses, she sat down across from me.

Suddenly realizing that this felt more like a date than it did a casual feeding, I was at a loss for words. Finally trying to break the ice, "I can't believe this. You better be careful, a guy could get used to this kind of thing."

Smiling she pointed to the plate, "Don't thank me 'till you taste it." Accepting the challenge, I cut a piece of the veal. Taking a bite, I closed my eyes and savored the taste and texture. It was very good veal. Opening my eyes back up I shot her a smile. After swallowing the bite, I smiled, "Excellent. I can't remember when I last had such good veal!"

Cutting a bite herself, she raised it up, "That's not saying a lot, coming from a guy with amnesia." Snapping at the fork, she snatched the veal from it and began chewing.

## Chapter 23

Holding my hands up in mock surrender, "OK. It's just great then, wonderful, and absolutely fabulous. You are a wonderful cook."

Smiling, she bowed her head to accept the compliment, "Thank you. I do order out a great veal if I say so myself." As she saw that sink in she laughed, "You were so dead over on the couch, you never heard the delivery guy."

Laughing we continued the meal, enjoying our time together. Good food, good wine and a good friend, what more could a guy ask?

\*\*\*\*\*

After diner we sat on the couch in the living room where Sheila showed me her photo album. It covered all of her career from when she worked as a dancer in a bar, up her current time with Zig Zag. Trying to get a rise from me, I didn't give her the satisfaction. After maintaining the servers for a large pornography site on the Internet, I was able to ignore the fact that the vixen in the picture was the Vixen leaning her head on my shoulder telling me all about the picture. I must admit though, the descriptions could be rater distracting at times.

After closing the book, I noticed that it was almost 9PM. I realized that I still needed to take a shower with that medicated shampoo. Nudging Sheila a little bit, said, "Hey, you know where a guy can take a shower around here? Doc said I should use that shampoo tonight before I went to bed and lord knows how long it will take for this fur to dry."

Getting up, Sheila waved over to the master bedroom, "The shower's in there. I'll go get your shampoo."

Getting up, I headed towards the room, then thought about my cast, "Hey Sheila, do you have any plastic wrap? I need to keep this cast dry." Hearing her acknowledgement, I headed into the bathroom. Inside I saw not only the usual plumbing, but also a large shower, and also something about the same size as a personal shower. It took a few moments to figure out what the other one was, until I remembered a Sabrina story that involved a full body fur drier. Chuckling I started to take off my shirt when I felt hands from behind giving me a hand. Taking the shirt I held it up. The holes in the back from the glass and bullets made it look like a waffle. Turning around to toss it into the trash I saw Sheila getting undressed. "Um, beg pardon, what are you doing?"

Looking up after having pulled her skirt off, "Why getting undressed, what does it look like?"

Ok, so I phrased it poorly, "Let me try again, WHY are you getting undressed?"

Pulling off her top this time, "Why? To help you in the shower of course."

If she went in the shower, lord knows what kind of stunt she'd pull, "I'm a big bear now you know, I think I can handle a shower."

Holding up the shampoo bottle with two fingers, it swung between them like a pendulum. "Yes, but who's going to get the blood out of your shoulder blades while you are trying not to slip and fall? Or didn't that occur to you, gimpy?"

## Chapter 23

Gimpy was it now? I may be dense but I do know when to surrender to logic. "OK, but on 1 condition."

Crossing her arms, she quipped, "I won't close my eyes, if that's what you're thinking. It's not like I haven't seen you naked."

Chuckling, I nodded, "I know that. No tricks. Especially not that tail trick that Zig Zag used in the hospital. Much as I'd enjoy playing, around with you, I don't want to rip a stitch or something."

Looking a little dejected, she nodded acceptance. "Agreed, nothing that's going to risk ripping a stitch."

Shaking my head, I disagreed, "That's not what I meant and you know it. You and Zig Zag have the idea that I'm your personal project to loosen up. You're going in there JUST to help me wash up. Anything else, and I go bunk with one of the guys. Preferably one I know is straight."

Now her ears wilted, "You are such a party pooper. Ok, nothing that can rip a stitch and no attempting to get you to loosen up."

Accepting that, I took the cell phone out of my shorts and put it on the counter. Taking off the shorts I glanced in the mirror. Philippe was right; a man did like to occasionally be naked with out being naked. As I 'gimped' over to the shower, Sheila turned it on and set the temperature.

I only hoped that Sheila was good to her word. I really didn't want to have to camp with a guy.

\*\*\*\*\*

After standing in the total body fur dryer I only had one thought. Why hadn't anyone built one of these in the other world! They were GREAT! I'd definitely have to get one as soon as I could afford it. After the timer turned off, I stepped out to Sheila who was standing there with a brush. I had soaked in the shower after she had gotten out to dry off. There wasn't enough room in that dryer for both of us.

Standing just outside of the dryer, she proceeded to brush out the fur on my back, being careful not to pull it too hard. Once again I had the feeling that she was enjoying this a lot more than I was.

Finished, I went to the counter and got a glass of water. Opening the antibiotics and pain meds, I took a capsule from each and downed them with the water. Picking up the cell phone, I held it up to Sheila, "Where did you put the charger for this thing?"

Taking it she walked into the bedroom and put it on a stand next to the bed. Watching this from the doorway, I asked, "Shouldn't that be up in the spare bedroom where I'm going to sleep?" Uh oh, she had that look again.

## Chapter 23

Sitting on the bed, she patted it, indicating I should come over. "You don't want to sleep up there. It's all full of boxes and stuff. I don't even have a bed in there. You'll be much more comfortable here.

Scowling at her, "Somehow I knew that offer was a bit too convenient. I couldn't understand why you even would have an extra bedroom anyway."

Walking over to me, she guided me to the bed, "A girls got to have a place for her stuff. Besides, I promised to be good. If you won't play nice, then at least let me snuggle up next to you while we sleep."

At this point I sat down on the bed and thought about what I was doing. What's my problem? I know I'm squeaky, but good lord, I've had the hots for her ever since I saw her. Now that I'm here, I've been resisting her every move. Looking at Sheila, I could see that she was watching me closely, trying to see what I was thinking. Running my right hand, paw, through my fur on the top of my hair, I was reminded just how different I had become as my ear brushed my arm. Looking over at her dressing table, I saw myself again, as if for the first time. I had really changed. This had been going on too long, and hurt too much to be a dream. I needed to spend some time deciding just how I was going handle this. I was going to have to decide if I'd become a recluse again, or loosen up.

Looking at Sheila, I saw her waiting for me to make up my mind. Deciding that I liked my new life, I mentally to cut the cord with my old one and vowed to loosen up. Leaning over I pulled her close and kissed her.

Arden Berridge had finally arrived.



# Chapter 24

The best laid plans of mice and weasels.

Relaxing at home, Daniel sat sipping a drink, and smiled. Tony's people had followed the limousine to a condo and watched him go in. Telling him to have his people keep an eye on things, Daniel had called the professionals. They had checked in with him after getting a room outside of town. Giving them the address, they assured him that the target would be the subject of tomorrow's news once again.

Looking over his shoulder at the young female leopard that had just wrapped her arms around him, he again smiled. Finishing his drink, Daniel got up and headed to the bedroom. Tonight was going to be very fulfilling.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sheila lay cuddled up to Arden's left side, her head pillowed on his shoulder. Idly rubbing the fur on his chest, she smiled at the memory of their getting in bed. He had clearly reached some kind of decision, and was finally ready to loosen up, however she wasn't quite ready to let him off the hook for the promise he forced her make before the shower. Giving an inward chuckle she realized that this was the first time in a very long time where she had gone to bed with a man and not actually had sex.

Rubbing her muzzle in the fur around the neck, she inhaled his sent. There was the smell of the medicated shampoo, and the oils she had used to dampen its overpowering smell. Continuing to breathe it in she separated the numerous smells, finally latching on to the one that was specifically his. Everyone has a unique sent, but his was strange even for a bear. She had met thousands of people in her travels to conventions and such, but nobody with a smell close to it. 'I wonder if it's unique to his species,' she thought.

As he unconsciously shifted his left arm, he pulled her closer, his paw reaching around to her stomach he held her in a close embrace. Trying to avoid squirming, Sheila clasp her paw over the back of his, pulling it away from her ribs. His claws tickled. Pulling his paw up towards her muzzle, she wanted to get a better whiff of his smell. She was surprised that there was a faint rotten egg smell of sulfur. Inhaling again, she verified its presence. 'How did he get sulfur on his paw?'

Using both paws she spread his paw out, and looked at it. She had seen an intricate scar on the palm, but had never gotten a clear look at it. Holding his hand so it would best catch the light streaming in from the window she saw the mark and froze. It was that face, the same one that was on the amulet. As she peered closer, she could see that it was, in fact, a perfect imprint of the medallion. Thinking back to the night that they had hit him, she replayed the scene.

Zig Zag had slowed down for the rain, and there had been a lot of lightning. After exiting, there had been a lightning strike in the middle of the road. It had scared her enough that she had closed her eyes, and covered her face with her hands in fear. Then they were spinning, they hit something hard enough to shatter the glass on her side of the door, roughly shoving her over towards the console. Trying to reach for something to hold onto, she saw the ditch looming up and then nothing, until she had realized they had come to a stop.

Remembering on, she forced herself to relive the experience that had been haunting her memories. Hearing the groans, walking across the road with that eerie fog boiling off of it, and at last seeing him lying there in the ditch. She remembered the look on his face when she touched him, and the recognition in his eyes as he asked her name. The hot almost burning feeling in her hand when he grabbed her, and the metal object it contained. And she remembered the smell, sulfur. She had thought it was the ditch, but now she wasn't sure.

Lacing her fingers through the back of his hand, she held his hand safely away from her ticklish ribs, and lay her head back down on his chest. This was all so strange, so very strange. Closing her eyes, she promised herself she'd ask him about it in the morning.

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*I was in my Blazer, driving down US 69 towards Plesanton. My girl friend Michelle was overdue and the store said she had left almost two hours ago. To make things worse, there was a severe thunderstorm coming in from the South West. Listening to the National Weather Service bulletins on my ham radio, I was concerned. Storm Spotters had already spotted dangerous cloud rotations down by Payola. This looked like it would be a very dangerous night. Glancing at the display, I verified that my radio was beaconing my position every ninety seconds. If I ran into trouble, friends would see me go off the air, and send help.*

*As I passed the Lawrenceville exit, the road narrowed from a four lane divided highway to an old fashioned two lane. Looking ahead as I drove south, I could see some very ugly clouds reflected in the lightening and the wind was beginning to shift. That was bad news; it meant that an inflow could be occurring. I'd have to keep my eyes and ears open for any indications of tornadic activity from other storm spotters or the NWS.*

*Passing the 359th street exit, I got my first hard signs of trouble when I started getting hit with hail. Backing off on the accelerator, I radioed into Net Control on my radio that I had hail at my location. While I was listening to them query me for more information, some large hail smashed my windshield. It didn't penetrate, but the window caved in dangerously, and the hail was getting worse. I was going to be in deep trouble if I didn't find some cover.*

*Dropping the microphone I downshifted and hit the 4x4 function on the drive train. I was still going almost 50 miles an hour, but I wanted all the control I could get. As the hubs synched up, a hard crosswind hit the car. The combination of water on the road, ice from the hail, the hubs locking in and the crosswind caused the car to begin to spin to the left. Hitting the gas, I tried to power out of the spin. Slowly the car straightened, then as the tire grabbed for a second, it sent me into a spin in the other direction. Standing on the clutch so that the tires wouldn't lock up, I felt the adrenaline pumping into my system and things slowed down.*

*As hail continued to pound down, it cracked and shattered the windows spraying glass and water over the interior of the truck. I thought I heard a low rumble, but blinded by the rain, I couldn't see what was happening. The next thing I knew, I was sitting halfway into the passengers seat despite wearing a seatbelt. My truck had slammed sideways into*

*a telephone poll, I was luckily it didn't break. Looking around for the microphone, I saw blood splattered across the interior of the vehicle. Checking myself for cuts, I saw that although I was bleeding, it wasn't enough to cause that much blood. Giving up on finding the microphone, I changed the beacon on my radio from IN-SERVICE to EMERGENCY and climbed out.*

*Going around to the back of the truck, I started to open the glass window, then just reached inside instead, retrieving a portable spotlight, a pith helmet and a rain-slicker. Donning the slicker and helmet, I turned on the flashlight. Proceeding to the passenger side of the car, I saw blood on the outside, slowly being washed away by the rain. Walking back the way I came, I kept checking in both directions for anyone else to come by. It looked like nobody else was stupid enough to be out driving in this crap.*

*After walking a couple of hundred feet back on one side of the road, I crossed to the other side and headed back, checking it out. Seeing a spot of bright yellow ahead on the far side of the ditch, I began running forward. It was a body. Dread filled me as I looked at whoever it was. Face down; I couldn't see if it was a man or a woman. Relieved that they weren't in a Lonnie's uniform, I shook myself free of the shock and ran over.*

*Whoever it was, they were pretty banged up; I could see the blood on the ground. Touching the neck, I felt for a pulse. There was no pulse. Rolling them over carefully, so as not to bend the neck, I got ready to perform CPR. It was a woman. As I cleared the hair from her face I froze. It was Michelle! She had changed clothes at the restaurant before heading back to the apartment.*

*Leaning down, I was about to start breathing for her when I got a good look at the side of her head, it was smashed. It had been her blood I had seen on the interior of the car. Taking her into my arms it was all I could do to hold her.*

*Crying, I called out her name over and over, the sky weeping with me in my grief.*

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Waking up, I was disoriented. The dream, the memory had been so real. Feeling Sheila's head on my shoulder, I looked over at her sleeping form. Carefully, I extricated myself from under her, laying her head on the pillow. Quietly getting up, I made my way to the bathroom. Sitting down on the stool, I put my face into my hands, trying to get control of the avalanche of emotions. It had been almost eight years since the accident. I hadn't had the nightmare for years. What was bringing it back now?

As I sat, trying to gather my thoughts, I heard a creak coming from the wall where the stairs were. Doing my best to stay quiet, I made my way over to the bathroom door. Standing inside the bathroom, I could see the doorway to the living room in the mirror of her dressing table. As I watched, the door slowly opened. Someone was in the house! Looking around in the dark bathroom for anything I could use as a weapon, I realized that I didn't even have my crutches.

Cursing to my self, I looked again from the shadows into the room. I could see the door was about half way open. A small shape was in the doorway, dressed all in black. As I watched, it moved slowly into the room, scanning as it went. I caught the outline of a

weapon silhouetted on the wall. As I watched he approached the bed. With his back to me, I had no choice. I didn't know if he was after me or not, but I couldn't allow him to hurt Sheila.

Careful not to hit my cast on anything, I slowly made my way out of the bathroom. As Sheila rolled over on the bed, I saw this guy just watching her. Her words about someone stalking her once came back with a vengeance. Taking two quick steps forward I planted my left foot. Hearing something behind him he turned, but not quick enough. Leaning to the left and rotating counter clockwise, brought my right leg around as fast as I could. There was a loud crunching sound as it struck his head. Following through on the kick, I let myself pivot all the way around till I was facing the bed again. Whoever it was had hit the outer bedroom wall HARD. As I watched he slumped slowly down to the floor.

Sheila woke up, "Arden? Is that you?" Making a shushing noise I whispered loudly, "Quiet."

Not entirely awake she sat up, "What's going on?"

Quickly I walked over to the bedroom door and closed it. Whispering loudly I waved at Sheila, "Damn it, be quiet! There's someone in here!" I saw the whites of her eyes as what I said sunk in. The creaking of the floor above us confirmed that someone else was inside. If anyone wanted to come through the bedroom door, there wasn't much I could do. Going over to the small guy by the wall, I looked him over. He was a mouse wearing a black body stocking, a military style equipment harness and some kind of night vision gear. The setup looked way to small for my head so I left it. Searching him quickly I found a pistol and two large clips for some sort of assault rifle. Looking behind me, I saw a submachinegun on the floor. Putting the clips and pistol on the bed I picked up the submachinegun. It was an MP5-SD, standard silenced weapon for covert operations forces. Not something a casual stalker would have. If I were right, his friend would come looking for him.

Thinking about it for a second, I grabbed the little rodent and carried him over to the bedroom door. Hanging him on the doorknob, I gently let go to make sure that it would hold. Hopefully his friend would mistake him for one of us trying to hold it closed.

Turning back to Sheila, I checked the MP5 over, "Sheila, call the cops." Seeing her stare at the mouse, I snapped my fingers a couple of times to get her attention. "Wake up! Call the cops, now!"

Nodding she reached over for her phone, picking it up, I heard her hit the button on the cradle several times, "It's dead."

Damn, that made sense. Spotting the cell phone on my side of the bed I pointed to it. "Get the cell phone then take it into the bathroom. Make the call from the dryer so nobody will hear you."

Nodding, she picked up the cell phone and crawled out of the bed. Just as she was climbing into the dryer, I heard the doorknob. Backing into the bathroom, I mentally kicked myself in the ass for leaving the pistol on the bed. It would have been a far

superior weapon for quick aiming. Just as I bent down so I could barely see the doorway in the mirror, I heard the rapid sound of something hitting the door. Straightening up a little, I saw the mouse jerking as he was repeatedly hit with bullets. Bending back down, I heard the crash of the door opening, the rodent flying into the middle of the room. Watching the doorway to see who came through I heard the sound of metal springing. Sticking my head up just a little more to get a better view, I saw a hand toss something into the room. Ducking back against the wall, I was momentarily deafened by an explosion.

The guy had tossed a stun grenade in the room; fortunately I only caught a fraction of its power. Shaking my head, I realized that all I could hear was a ringing. Peeking in the mirror and back into the room, I saw a tall form dressed similarly to the mouse. Having scanned the room, he looked over at the door to the bathroom. This was going from bad to worse. Odds were that he'd take me out if I tried to snipe him. It's not like these walls are going to stop a bullet. As I watched, I saw him pull another flash-bang grenade with his left hand while covering the door with his right. I was screwed.

Just as I was about to try to dive through the door I heard another loud bang, only this time it wasn't a grenade. Reeling from the living room door, the large form tried to turn and aim it's weapon. Again there was a loud blast and in the mirror I saw a form with a shotgun. Reloading he fired repeatedly at the form until it finally fell to the floor and didn't move. Stepping into the room, he turned on the bedroom light. Blinking at the light, I saw that it was a large bulldog in a security uniform carrying a pump-action shotgun. Looking at the two bodies in the room, he leaned against the doorway, lowering the shotgun. I saw blood on his face.

Hoping he was on our side but not willing to assume so, I stepped out of the bathroom while aiming the MP5 at him. "Who are you?"

Seeing the submachine gun in my hand, he dropped the shotgun and held his hand up. "I'm with BullDog Security. Zig Zag hired us to keep an eye on the condo."

Gesturing to his head, I asked, "What happened to you?"

Touching the blood on the side of his head, he suddenly realized he was bleeding, "I saw the little one jimmying the sliding glass door in the back, as I approached him the big one blindsided me."

Hearing the sound of a police siren, I gestured for him to sit on the bed. Sheila came up behind me and touched my shoulder, "The police will be here in a minute." Looking down at the two now very bloody bodies on the floor she gasped and dropped the phone. I heard her run back into the bathroom and vomit into the john. Glancing down at the bodies, I suddenly had the urge to join her. Biting back the bile in my throat, I managed to control the urge.

Just about that time I heard someone banging on the front door. Gesturing to the guard, I motioned him over to the front door. When we got to the front door, I gestured for him to open it. The cops, seeing me with a MP5, immediately starting yelling for me to drop the weapon, while drawing their guns. Cops were cops in any dimension. Flipping the safety

## Chapter 24

on with my thumb, I ejected the magazine and set the weapon on the table. Putting my hands up, I waited for them to come in.

To his credit, the guard tried to calm down the cops. "Hey! Take it easy! He's not the bad guy! He LIVES here!"

Hearing this, they simply kept me up against the wall as all their comrades invaded the house. I heard Sheila yelling, asking what were they looking at. I chuckled knowing that she was almost back to normal. After a couple of minutes one of the cops came out of the bedroom and had the others let me go.

Heading into the living room I sat down on a chair, giving my leg a rest. Kicking that rodent in the head had smashed the plaster on the front of the foot and my leg ached from the blow. As I was getting comfortable, Sheila came out wearing a housecoat and carrying a large towel. Helping me up, I wrapped it around my waist and sat back down. As the adrenaline slowly faded, I could feel my back. It was going to make me pay for this in the morning. Getting the attention of one of the cops, I asked him to fetch my pain meds.

Trying to get comfortable I waited for the inevitable interrogation from the cops. This was going to take all night.

\*\*\*\*\*

Zig Zag was comfortably inside the spoon formed by James when the phone rang. Peeling her eyes open, she saw that it was almost there in the morning. Reaching over, she grabbed the handset. "What?"

An unfamiliar voice was on the other end, "Is this Zig Zag?"

Letting out a low growl, she was barely audible, "If this is anything but a life threatening emergency, it soon will be if I get a hold of you."

Clearing his throat the other voice answered, "This is Detective Lewis from the Columbus PD."

Now wide-awake, Zig Zag moved away from James and over to the edge of the bed, sitting up she asked, "What can I do for you Detective?"

"There's been a break in over at one of your employee's condominiums, one Sheila Vixen," he replied, reading the name.

Oh no! Arden had been right. Someone had been after him. "Was anyone hurt? Is everyone ok?"

Calmly the voice answered, "There's nothing to worry about at the moment. Both Sheila and her houseguest are fine. There were two armed assailants that broke into the domicile. According to the witnesses, the houseguest and a BullDog security agent were able to handle the situation."

Somewhat relieved, Zig Zag asked again, "So nobody was hurt?"

## Chapter 24

She could hear the detective give a snort, "If you mean your people, no. Unfortunately however, neither of the two assailants survived the encounter."

Relieved, Zig Zag slumped slightly, "Thank you. What do you need me to do."

"I need you to arrange to pick them up. We will be working in the apartment for the better part of the day. If you have a place they can stay, it would be a great help."

Nodding to the phone, "OK. I'll be over there as soon as possible. Thank you."

Hanging up the phone, Zig Zag got up to get dressed. Taking some clothes and her shoes into the living room, she quickly got dressed. Heading into the kitchen, she took the keys to James's Land Rover. Climbing in, she started the vehicle, opened the garage with the remote and backed out onto the street. Closing the garage she headed over to Sheila's silently thanking whatever god was watching over those kids for keeping them safe.

\*\*\*\*\*

Pulling into the station, Michael took a look at the clock on the dash. It was 4:30AM. He had been unable to sleep at the motel and had decided to drive back to town. Getting to his desk, he looked through the notes on the desk.

Reading through them, he saw that his John Doe had been released from the hospital, then a few hours later shot in a drive-by shooting. According to the hospital report, he was released after having the injuries repaired. As he continued to read the phone rang. "Jones"

"Jones this is Lewis." Recognizing the voice, Jones put down the papers, "Yah Mike, what's up?"

He could hear other voices in the background, "Dispatch said you had gotten back. I got some news on your John Doe."

Curious now, he listened closely, "What do you have for me."

Listening he heard the other Detective move to a quieter area, "Two assailants, professionally equipped, broke into the condominium where he was staying with one Sheila Vixen," there was that name again. "Apparently your John Doe took one of them out while it was giving the vixen a look-over. He then hung the guy on the door to screw with whoever tried to get in after him. Unfortunately for the guy his friend decided to shoot first and ask questions later. The second assailant was taken down by a rent-a-dick that was hired to cover the premises. They were picked up a few minutes ago by Zig Zag and will be staying at her place. I've got the address if you need it."

Nodding, he completed his notes; "I've got it already, thanks. You say this wasn't just a B&E?"

He heard a bark of laughter, "These guys had low light goggles, stun grenades and MP5-SD submachine guns. They were wearing military style body stockings, equipment harnesses and body armor. If they weren't professionals, then they were one hell of a pair of amateurs."

## Chapter 24

Letting this sink in, Michael thought for a second. Two attacks on this guys life in one day. Someone didn't like him. "I presume you found no ID on them?"

"Yep. They were clean. The car was stolen out of Chicago yesterday from a used car lot. We have nothing on them." Finishing his notes, Michael thanked the other detective and hung up. Someone was trying to kill his man and that was not acceptable. He wasn't one to let an unsolved case go, death or no death.

Calling down to the desk sergeant, he made sure that police protection had been ordered for Zig Zag's residence. Michael would head home for a quick shower and change of clothes. Once he was presentable again, he'd go talk to this guy again.

\*\*\*\*\*

Daniel had slept wonderfully. The professionals he had arranged for should have done their work, and Mandy had turned out to be more talented than he had at first hoped. Proceeding out to the kitchen, he heard Mandy making something. Inhaling he smelled eggs, ham and bacon. This was unexpected. Upon entering the kitchen, he saw that she had place settings on the counter. A glass of juice and some coffee was waiting for him. Smiling he walked over to her, "You have out done yourself. I never expected THIS kind of service."

Pouring the omelet she had just made onto a plate already loaded with slab of cured ham, she picked up the plates and turned. "Normally I don't, however in you're case, I'll make an exception." Proceeding over to the counter, she set the plates down and gestured for him to sit. "A girl has to take care of her special customers if she ever wants them to become steady clientele."

Cutting off some of the ham, he speared some omelet and the ham. Taking a bite he chewed slowly, letting the flavor settle into his tongue. Smiling he leaned forward, "Perhaps we will be able to negotiate a long term relationship."

Giving him a little wink, she leaned back, "That can be arranged." Picking up a remote control she turned on the TV and selected a channel. As Daniel ate, he became aware that it was the news.

"That's right folks, our favorite snowman is in it again. If you will remember from our late news last night, some gang-bangers took a shot at ZZ Studios yesterday while he and a couple of other talent were leaving. Due to the quick thinking of our anonymous arctic asset, he managed to protect both of the other people while taking no less than five bullets in the back. To top that off, the wounds weren't even severe enough to cause a stay in the hospital overnight.

This reporter has been informed that apparently our fluffy white friend was staying with no other than the Blue Goddess Sheila Vixen when two unknown assailants attempted to finish what the gang-bangers started yesterday."

At the word 'attempted', Daniels stopped eating and paid close attention.

"Police report that our gigantic gimp with the broken leg, used his cumbersome cast to clobber the crook, then while his comrade in arms was busy upstairs, he made like a busy little beaver and rigged up a



## Chapter 24

delay while his sexy hostess called for the cavalry. Reports say that the second intruder had the drop on our man but was interrupted in the rudest manner you could think of. An employee of BullDog Security, who had been assigned to guard the house, but had been bushwhacked by the bad guys, recovered in time to introduce the second perpetrator to a full magazine of shotgun shells at close range. You've got to love those BullDogs!"

At this point Daniel picked up the glass of orange juice and threw it into the front of the TV. Ignoring the sparks and glass emanating from the destroyed device, he simply glared at it.

'How could this be happening? They were professionals for gods' sake!' Picking up his cell phone off its charger he walked back to his bedroom where he had some calls to make. He was going to have to do some fast-talking to explain how this could have happened.

\*\*\*\*\*

When James awoke, he found himself in an empty bed. Feeling over on Zig Zag's side, he found that the bed was cold. She had been gone for some time. Looking at the clock he saw that it was close to 4:30AM. Getting up, he put on a bathrobe and walked through the house. Not seeing Zig Zag, he checked the garage and found that his Land Rover was gone. Turning to try to call on the phone, he heard the garage door opening. Looking back through the door, he saw his Land Rover pulling up. As it pulled into the garage he could see that not only Zig Zag was in it, but also Sheila and Arden. He went out to greet her as she turned off the engine and closed the garage.

Opening the door for Zig Zag he asked, "Hey, what's going on?"

Opening up the back door, Zig Zag reached in and grabbed two small overnight bags, "Someone broke into Sheila's apartment tonight. They were both heavily armed. The police think it was a professional hit."

"Good lord! This guy has professional hit men after him and she brings him into her home?" He was about to protest when he saw the look on her face as she watched Sheila help Arden get out. Looking over, he saw Arden doing as much to hold Sheila up as she was helping him out. He felt betrayed by his initial instincts to protect Zig Zag. This was her equivalent of family, and like it or not, he was going to support her in it. Taking the bags he led the way inside and to the spare bedroom. As Sheila and Arden came in, he noticed that Arden wasn't using any crutches. Hobbled by not being able to bend his leg, he was otherwise not having much trouble walking.

Looking at the cast, James realized that the top part of the foot was broken, and had blood on it. "What happened to your foot?"

Looking down Arden realized what he was referring to, "That's what happens when you give a large mouse a round-house boot to the head." At mention of the fight, Sheila excused herself and headed to the bathroom. Looking at James, "Please, I don't want to talk about it around Sheila, she's still a bit shaken up about it."

Seeing that he wasn't dodging the question, James patted him on the shoulder, "I'm just glad neither of you were hurt." Giving a quick squeeze, James released him and left. Crossing the hall to Zig Zag's room, he saw her sitting on the bed, not moving.

As he sat down next to her, she began to talk, "The cops asked me to pack up some clothes for them. They had removed the bodies, but there was still blood. Blood on the floor, on the wall, it just smelled of blood." Looking at James, "They tried to kill them James. What kind of people are we dealing with?"

Taking her into his arms, he just held her. "I don't know Zig. I just don't know."

\*\*\*\*\*

I closed the door to the bedroom behind James and didn't bother to lock it; we are all adults here after all. Stripping off my shirt, I knocked on the door to the bathroom. Not getting an answer, I opened the door. Sheila was sitting on the toilet seat, her arms wrapped around her. Walking over I squatted down on my left leg while sticking my right one to the side. Taking in her chin in my hand, I lifted it up so I could see her eyes, "Hey, it's OK now. They can't hurt us. They'll never hurt anyone else."

She gave me a hard stare, "But what about the next, and the next one after that?"

Letting go of her, I stood up. "I don't know. I don't even know why they're trying to kill me for gods sake!" Turning I walked out of the bathroom, "Maybe it would be best if I just left." Picking up the overnight bag I put it on the bed. Taking out a shirt and some pants, I started to get dressed. Annoyed at the cast, I began hacking at it with my claws, slicing the side.

Hearing this, Sheila came to the doorway, "What are you doing?"

Pausing, I looked up, "What's it look like I'm doing? I'm trying to get rid of this cast. I won't be able to walk with it on for any distance."

Coming over to me she put her paw on mine, "But it's broken."

I looked straight into her face, trying to keep as neutral an emotional mask as possible, "It's better. Besides, what do you care? I'm just an unacceptable risk."

Her eyes got wide at that then narrowed. Grabbing me by the shoulders she pushed me back on the bed. Practically sitting on my chest and arms, she growled in my face, "You are not just an unacceptable risk. I don't know what you are, and neither do you, but that's not the point damn it!" Sitting up, she looked down on me. "I don't know what you are, but I do know that you're important to me, and I don't want anyone or anything to hurt you."

Sitting up quickly, I would have dumped Sheila on the floor if I hadn't caught her in my arms. Holding her close to me I looked down into her eyes. "I knew that. I never wanted to leave you. I just wanted to make sure you felt the same way." As she put her head on my chest I rested mine on the top of hers. "I swear we'll beat this thing. I promise."

## Chapter 24

Feeling her returning the hug, I grimaced a little. "One last thing love." She looked up, eyes wide. I tried to smile, "Would you mind getting my pain meds, I think I pulled a stitch just now."

\*\*\*\*\*

As I lay in bed, Sheila once again tucked by my side, I quietly sang Nanuk's song of healing. Settling her head a little better, Sheila opened her eyes, "What's that you're singing?"

Smiling down at her, "It's a song a very good friend taught me. She said it would help me heal."

Closing her eyes, Sheila said quietly as she started to fall asleep, "I like it, it's pretty."

Closing my eyes, I continued to sing the song for as long as I could remember too, eventually falling asleep myself.

\*\*\*\*\*

I awoke with a start. Looking around I saw the door open and Zig Zag stuck her head in. Seeing Sheila still asleep she whispered in a theater voice, "There's a detective here, says he wants to talk to you. It's the same tiger from the hospital. Tell him to wait, or go away?"

I put my head on the pillow and thought. I might as well get this over with. Maybe spend some time with Zig and James. Lifting my head back up I whispered, "Have him wait, I'll be right out." Nodding Zig Zag closed the door.

Once again, I carefully extricated myself from Sheila. Giving her a kiss on the forehead, I put on some over-sized swimming trunks and a T-shirt. Quietly closing the door behind me, I gimped my way down to the dining area where I saw the same detective that had said he'd identified me. Walking in, I sat down across the table from him and shot him a very tired look. "How can I be of assistance Detective?" I asked with a yawn.

Zig Zag came in with a service set and after pouring a cup of coffee for each of us, poured herself one and sat down next to me. "You have no objections to me being here, do you Detective?"

Opening his brief case, he shook his head. "None at all Ms. Zig Zag."

Holding up a hand, Zig Zag corrected him, "It's just Zig Zag. No miss or anything else in front of it."

Nodding, Michael noted the correction. Passing a picture over to me, he asked, "Have you ever seen these people before?"

Picking up the picture, I saw a group of five bears standing in front of a camper. Shaking my head, I looked up at the detective, "Sorry, can't say as I ever have."

Pointing to the picture he asked me to look again. Studying the picture, I suddenly placed it. One had been taken like it in my world almost twenty five years ago. It was my

## Chapter 24

family and myself on vacation in Key West. That was the summer I had learned to water ski. I recognized it, but it wasn't my family.

Handing it back to him I shook my head. "I'm sorry, I've never seen them before."

Nodding, the detective handed me a sketchbook. Opening it, I flipped through. Whoever this belonged to, they were as crappy an artist I was. About half way through the book I saw sketches of Sabrina, Zig Zag and Sheila. Zig Zag who was looking over my shoulder placed her hand on the page. "That's me."

Giving her a nudge in the ribs, "Hey lady, you're famous. You've got to expect people to having drawings of you." Continuing to flip through the book, I finally closed it. Handing it back, I shook my head again. Finally he passed over a PDA. Picking it up I activated it. As I scrolled through the pages, I saw all the same programs I had loaded on mine at home. Activating the phone book I scrolled through the numbers. Most of the names were ones I recognized. The ones most obviously missing were my relatives. My mothers number, aunts, anybody related. I kept those numbers in my PDA.

Seeing the look on my face, Detective Jones asked, "Does it look familiar?"

I looked up at him realizing what he had said. Turning it off, I passed it back. "It looks familiar, but I don't have a specific memory. Maybe it's just because I've seen a bunch of people with them."

Putting the PDA back in his briefcase, he took out a picture. Handing it to me, I could see it was from a driver's license that had been enlarged. "How about this guy? Do you know him?"

Taking a good look at the picture, I compared it to how I would look with dark hair, or fur. The face struck me as very familiar, yet unfamiliar at the same time. This must have been my counterpart. Handing it back, I shook my head. I could honestly say I hadn't seen him before.

Obviously unhappy that he didn't get any kind of a response, he put the picture away and closed the briefcase. "Ok Mr. Berridge, what can you tell me about what happened last night?"

Zig Zag jumped in at this, "What's that got to do with trying to identify him?"

Looking at Zig Zag, he shook his head, "Frankly madam, I don't have a clue. But twice in the last twenty-four hours someone has tried to kill him. There's only one reason I can think of, and so far it hasn't checked out."

Tapping her claws on the table, Zig Zag pursed her lips a little, "And what reason is that?"

Putting my hand on Zig Zag's shoulder I gave it a squeeze. As she looked at me I shrugged, "Hey, he's just trying to do his job." Looking back over at the Detective, "Like the lady says, what's the reason?"

## Chapter 24

Leaning forward looked me in the eyes very intently, "The only reason I can think of for a corpse to have your fingerprints is if it was something to do with the witness protection program."

That got my attention. Sitting up, I looked at Zig Zag and saw a confused look on her face too. This was perfect. Witness protection program, but if that were true, then some agency would have had to be involved. If no agency had answered him then it would have to be something illegal. That wasn't good. This could go either way for me. Shrugging I looked at the guy again, "I'm sorry, but I honestly don't remember anything about a witness protection program."

Jones clearly wasn't satisfied with that. Leaning back he picked up the folder and placed it in the briefcase. Taking out a business card, he put it on the table. "Thank you for your time. If either of you think you have anything that could help, please let me know."

I sat there looking at the card as Zig Zag showed him out. This guy was going to be my guardian angel or my executioner. Only time would tell.

# Chapter 25

And just when we were having a good time too...

Michael watched the gangbanger through a one-way mirror. Sources on the street had lead investigators to believe that he may have been involved in the drive by shooting. The arresting cops had found a weapon on him, violating his probation. They had tried using the promise of a plea bargain to get him to talk, but so far he had refused to talk. Jones had convinced the other detectives to give him the case. Making up his mind, he walked out into the hallway and into the interrogation room.

As the detective entered, the kid watched him with practiced disregard. Sitting down with the case file on him, Jones examined it. The young raccoon had a long history of arrests for drugs, weapons violations, assault, and burglary. Folding the file Jones leaned back in his chair. "Well Nicky, you screwed up this time. A weapons violation will put you back in detention till you're 18."

Acting nonchalant, the kid just shrugged, "I gots friends in there."

Smiling, Jones was sure he did, "What if I could make this arrest go away for you."

The kid blinked at that. Glancing over to the mirror, he looked back at Jones warily, "Make it go away how?"

Making a sweeping motion with his hand, "It never happened. No reports, no entry in your case file, nothing."

Leaning forward on the table, the kid was clearly listening, "I ain't given up none uh my homies."

Nodding, Jones leaned forward, "I want you to tell me who ordered that hit on Mr. Stay Puff yesterday. You give me a name that I can believe in, and I'll make your troubles go away."

Leaning back the kid crossed his arms, "Man that ain't no deal!"

"Sure it is. I don't believe you guys just got a wild hair up your ass to go shoot up Zig Zag's. Someone put you up to it. I don't want you to testify or give up any of your friends. I just want to know who paid you to do it."

Shaking his head, the kid explained, "Man, you wouldn't believe me if I told you anyway. Why should I tell you when you're just gonna tell me I'm lying."

Crossing his legs, Jones folded his hands in front of him, "Try me. You'd be amazed at the things I'd believe right now. Tell me who and why. If it make sense, you walk." Jones watched as the kid mulled this over. "Three years in detention's a long time not to see the outside world."

The kid glared at him, then finally leaned forward, "Ok Mr. Detective Man. You don't spring me for this, you're name's gonna be all over the street, you got that?" Nodding, Jones waited for him to continue, "It was the DA. That Khansman guy."

## Chapter 25

The name of the DA made Michael sit up strait, "Why would the DA order a hit? And what leverage does he have on you guys that he can do that?"

The kid glanced at the mirror again, "From what I heard, the snow man was screwin' up his plans for Zig Zag and he wanted to get rid of him before he could clear his name."

Leaning back in his chair again, Michael tried to digest what he had just heard. It made sense. When he had determined Arden's identity, the media went after him with a vengeance. If the DA discovered that he was cleared in the death of the man in Kansas City, then that would definitely screw up his plans. But to order a hit, that was unthinkable. "What's he got on your gang?"

Leaning forward, the kid got real quite. "Mike's brother, James, got busted for armed robbery. That's his third. He gets convicted and it's the gray bar hotel for life. DA said he'd plead him if we scratched the bear."

Nodding Michael could see it. The DA had the ability to approve plea bargains that would reduce the crime and keep the guy out of jail. The puzzles were falling in place.

Standing up he pushed the chair under the table. "We didn't have this talk, right?"

Look of betrayal on his face the kid stood up, "Hey! We had a deal man!"

Smiling, Jones nodded, "Of course we did. They'll be letting you out in a few minutes. Seeing the raccoons jaw drop, Jones chuckled. "I never said I wouldn't follow through, just that we never talked."

As he left the room there was a spring in his step. Jones had found out that the search warrant they had used to arrest the kid was invalid. It listed the wrong address. He would have gotten out anyway, but now Jones had a possible lead.

The question was, what to do with it.

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As I was sitting at the table thinking about Jones and my future, a pair of hands suddenly covered my eyes. A whisper in my ear asked, "Guess who?"

Smiling, "Hmmmmm, Could it be Sheila?" I felt a nip on my ear, "Ouch!" Ducking and turning I saw Zig Zag move around me and begin to clean up the coffee service. "What did you do that for?"

Smiling at me, she winked, "Just so you remember that Sheila's not the only woman in this house. We wouldn't want to make your life boring now would we?"

I had to smile, "No, somehow I don't think you could. In fact, I seriously doubt that anyone around you has a boring life Zig Zag." Standing, I pushed the chair in and followed Zig Zag into the kitchen. Looking around I saw she had a very nice setup, center cook top, plenty of counter space, large capacity stainless steel refrigerators, the works. Leaning on the counter I watched as she began to wash the cups. "This is a very nice place you have here Zig Zag."

She smiled back, "Thank you, I had it built to my specifications. It's as high tech as I could make it without trying to automate it."

Looking out the kitchen door into the back yard, I saw a fairly nice sized yard that was well cared for. The porch extended out from the house about twenty feet and then changed to a cement pad around an Olympic length pool with a diving board at one end. The water was crystal clear and the light reflecting from the waves was almost hypnotic. "Do you swim a lot?"

"Eh?" Looking at me, she saw where I was looking. "I used to, but not any more. I guess I just haven't had the time." I could hear the longing in her voice at that last part.

Walking over to the sink, I picked up the dishtowel and began drying the cups she had just washed. "Then I guess that you should make a little more time for yourself. I know it can be easy to throw yourself into something and lose track of what's really important."

Shaking her head, she put the last cup on the counter and began on the pitcher, "It's not that easy. I've got production schedules, conventions, promotional work, editing reviews. These movies won't make themselves."

Drying the last cup, I placed it upside down on another towel. "You've got competent people right? You don't seem to be the type to hire screw ups, myself the exception. Why not trying to delegate some more of your workload and start taking more time for yourself."

Leaning on the counter, she looked out the window at the pool, "It's not that simple, my work is my life, it's been everything to me."

Finished drying the pot, I put it with the cups. Handing Zig Zag the towel so she could dry her hands, "Your work isn't your life Zig Zag, it's your work. It's just a part of your life. Just like James is now." Walking back out towards the living room I paused at the door. "When was the last time you took a vacation? Not a road trip to a convention, but actually got on a plane to some remote location where you didn't give a damn about work?"

Zig Zag just shook her head. "I thought so." Turning I headed for the bedroom. I was still tired and wanted to get some sleep. Laying down I cuddled up against Sheila again, hoping that Zig Zag would give up on trying to loosen me up, and start working on herself.

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Sheila lay on the soft moss, listening to the sound of the water trickling down the small rock-fall and into the pool near by. A gentle breeze was blowing, carrying the smell of orchids on its wings while songbirds sang. Opening her eyes, Sheila sat up and looked around. Once again she was in the glade that she had dreamed of before. Looking at her paws, she could see that they were normal. Getting up, she knelt by the pool and looked at her reflection, it was the same face she looked at every day.



## Chapter 25

Curious, she stood and took a good look around. Having seen repeating dreams, it was strange that this one had changed. Hearing singing, she approached the hut. The song was familiar, yet she couldn't place it. Hesitating at the doorway, Sheila paused before opening the door. Some inner voice shouted to her that she wouldn't like what she saw. Reaching a decision, she pulled on the rope handle, and pushed the door open. Inside she saw that the interior appeared the same, with the exception that someone was sitting at the table.

Examining him from the door, she saw that it was a man. He had short fur on the top and back of his head as well as on the cheeks of his muzzle. The muzzle was short, and rounded, similar to the way that she looked in her last dream. His ears were rounded and low on the side of his head and the nose was smaller and inverted from what she thought to be normal. He had no fur other than that on his head. His eyes closed, he rocked back and forth in time with the singing. Looking behind him she saw a large white female bear, her hands resting on his shoulders, quietly singing.

Her hand, slack with shock, released the rope and the latched clattered shut. Opening his eyes, he looked over at the door, blinking with disbelief, he stood up, the bear stepping back from him, and calmly clasp her hands in front of her. Stepping towards her, he spoke, "Sheila? Is that you?"

Backing away from the door, Sheila turned and ran. She had recognized the voice. It was Arden's.

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Being in Nanuk's hut as my old self had been strange enough, but to see Sheila here was a shock. The look of horror on her face as I called to her and the way she ran was devastating. Turning to Nanuk, I shot an accusing glance, "What are you trying to show me? That she won't be able to accept knowing who I was?"

Smiling at me, she held her arms out and stepped forward to embrace me. Backing up I shook my head, "No. First I'm here looking like this. Next you take the woman I think that I may love, and show her this form! Why!"

I could see my words had stung. Lowering her arms she sat at the table, and gestured for me to sit also. After I sat down, she explained, "She must begin to accept you as you were, and as you someday may become again. If we do not do this now, then it may be too late. You wouldn't want to lose her because she wasn't prepared for the truth would you?"

Realizing the truth in what she was saying, shook my head, "I'm sorry Nanuk. But you could have warned me. I could have played it different."

Reaching across the table, she patted my hand and smiled, "Nanuk knows what she is doing. This way is best. You must trust Nanuk."

Nodding, acceptance, I got up and walked out of the hut. There was no trace of Sheila. I had no idea where she would go from here.

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Sheila awoke with a start, panting for breath; she realized that her heart was pounding. The dream vividly alive in her memory, she slipped out from under Arden's arm, and climbed out of bed. Turning to look at the bed. Hugging herself unconsciously, she stared at Arden's face. Why had she seen him in a dream that way? What had prompted it? Remembering her words this morning, "You are not just an unacceptable risk. I don't know what you are, and neither do you, but that's not the point damn it!"

Why in the world had she said that? I don't know what you are? How come she didn't say 'I don't know who you are?' Somehow that didn't sound right either.

Shivering from the adrenaline still pumping in her system, Sheila went into the bathroom. Grabbing a large towel she headed for the shower. Maybe some hot water would help her to relax again.

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Forcing myself to wake up from the glade, I saw that Sheila wasn't in the bed next to me. As I started to get out of bed, I heard the shower being turned on. I had noticed blood on the sheets when I got back in bed from my back. Apparently I had pulled something open. Taking the medicated shampoo from the overnight bag I headed for the bathroom. Sheila was already inside, standing under the spray with her head down, unmoving. Watching her for a second I saw that she was just soaking under the hot spray. Taping on the glass door, I saw her jump back, startled. Cracking the door, I peaked in, "Is this a private party or can just anyone jump in."

Sheila just stood flattened against the tiles, like a wild animal trapped. After a few seconds I saw here shake her head and give a weak smile. "Sure, you just startled me."

Stepping into the shower, I closed the door and put the shampoo on the shelf under the showerhead. Sheila still had the look of a frightened cub on her face. Reaching out slowly, I paused as she flinched. Dropping my arm, I gave her a pleading look, "You will never have anything to fear from me Sheila. Please, don't ever be afraid of me."

As what I said penetrated the vale of fear, she took a hesitant step forward, and then another. Stopping a few inches away, she looked up, "What's happening to me, to us? Why am I having these dreams?"

Taking her gently into my arms I held her, "I don't know. You haven't even told me about them." Searching her eyes, I continued, "Give me a chance, and we'll work this out. I promise that I'll tell you everything I know once all the pieces are in place. Right now, there are such gaps." It wasn't quite a lie. She was missing important pieces of the puzzle. I couldn't, no wouldn't risk alienating her again.

\*\*\*\*\*

Sabrina once again pulled up in front of ZZ Studios and parked. Getting out, she waved at the security guards. There was a work crew replacing the glass front to the building. Heading straight into the building she walked from the foyer into her office. There was a brand spanking new 25" flat screen monitor on her desk where the old one had sat. A stray bullet from the drive by had taken out her old monitor tube. James had helpfully

suggested a flat screen display not only as a way to get her a bigger work space for her graphics, but also to free up room on the desk.

Grinning like the proverbial cat that ate the bird, she moved the mouse canceling the screen saver. Seeing that the tech that replaced the monitor had killed WinUAE she double clicked on the icon. As the words "This is Amiga speaking" flowed from the speakers, she clicked on her working configuration. Watching the Amiga desktop come up over windows, she glanced at the door and smiled. Sabrina had managed to keep her Amiga emulator a little secret. It was so much easier to work with her old Amiga applications than to try to learn that Adubie stuff.

Picking up the days work, she laid it on the scanner and opened up the capture program. Time to become productive.

\*\*\*\*\*

Shampooing Sheila had been an experience I hadn't gotten around to last time. It was both entertaining AND educational. I learned several new things about our bodies that just wouldn't quite have worked in the old world. At one point Zig Zag had opened the door and shouted for us to leave some hot water for everyone else. Sheila looked embarrassed, not being used to sharing a bathroom. Me, I had decided to loosen up.

Shouting back out I replied, "Hey Zig Zag! If you want some hot water, why not come on in? There's room for the three of us!" Unfortunately for me, I couldn't see her reaction because of the frosted glass and also my lack of glasses. Sheila gave me a grin of utter astonishment and a light shot to the ribs.

Zig Zag said something that I couldn't quite hear. After asking her to repeat it I finally heard, "I'll pass. Just hurry up will you? You're going to miss lunch."

I was actually beginning to enjoy taking showers. Unfortunately for my cast, I had forgotten to wrap it. After climbing out of the shower, both Sheila and I came to the same conclusion. I was going to have to get it redone. Using my claws, I finished splitting it down the side and took my leg out. Placing the wet cast in the trash, I climbed back in while Sheila washed the remaining plaster out of my fur. While in the shower, I tested my leg by standing on it. Although it would probably hold my weight, it still hurt. It may be healing fast, but it wasn't completely repaired.

Sitting on a stool in the shower, I waited for my turn at the dryer. I'd have to talk to the doc and see if he'd do a house call. If not, maybe I could get someone to give me a ride out there. Then again, if I used crutches, who's to say I wouldn't be OK without the damned thing.

\*\*\*\*\*

At lunch, I took the opportunity to bring up a question I had wanted answered. "Zig Zag, James, I need your advice." Seeing I had their attention, "After my impromptu interview in the hospital, I got numerous interview requests from all the local stations and some networks."

Nodding, Zig Zag swallowed the bite of her sandwich, "I know, we've got a ton of messages at the studio for you too. I've been having them toss the duplicates. Are you thinking about doing an interview?"

Nodding, "Yah, that detective got me thinking. Right now someone's after me because they think I'm this other Arden guy, when we know for a fact that I'm not. If someone out there thinks that I'm actually him, maybe we can set the record straight. If nothing else, I can try to answer some of the bizarre things they've been saying."

Shaking her head, Zig Zag disagreed, "I don't trust the media. No matter who you go on. Even 90 minutes tends to distort things for their own use. There's no way you can be sure you're not going to get screwed."

Nodding, I put down the food, "I agree. Most all of the media I've seen around town isn't what you'd call impartial, except one, the guy on the UHF station."

Zig Zag's jaw dropped, "Are you kidding? That guy looks for ANY excuse to talk bad about someone."

Smiling I nodded in agreement, "Exactly why I want to talk to him. He's not going to try to smooch up for an exclusive. He tells it the way he sees it, even if he does it in an off-handed way. Personally I like the guy. I think he's a hoot."

Scowling, Zig Zag took a sip of her coffee, "That's because you haven't had him dragging your name through the mud."

Sitting back, I crossed my arms and arched my eyebrows at her, "I beg your pardon? He may not have as much material to work me over with..... yet..... but I do think that he's going to be the fairest platform out there. And believe me when I say that I think I can hold my own with him. But I wanted to talk it over with you first."

Looking over at James for some direction, Zig Zag finally shook her head, "I'd rather you not, but it's up to you."

Trying one last-ditch idea, "How about if David comes on with me. I could have him stand behind me with a Nerf-bat and hit me whenever I was saying something I shouldn't. Kind of like they do at those congressional hearings."

Chuckling she just shook her head. Oh well, maybe after I got HER loosened up a little, she'd mellow out with the media. If you can't fight them, join them.

\*\*\*\*\*

After lunch, Zig Zag loaned us her Mercedes to head over to the docs. He had agreed to redo my cast at his place. After getting the directions we had headed off. A few blocks from the house, Sheila turned off the radio. Sitting in silence I remembered Philippe saying that she was very eclectic. Just about to suggest that she could have changed the channel she spoke.

"What's that mark on your left hand?"

## Chapter 25

Wow, what a question, short and to the point. Opening my hand, I looked at the face, once again mocking me. "It is an imprint, a brand of sorts, from an item called the Amulet of Lakesh. I think I was holding it when I got hit by the car."

Still staring at the road, she was careful to watch everything but me. "How did the mark get on your hand?"

Clenching my fist, I tried to think of an answer. "I'm not sure exactly. When I woke up in the hospital it was there, but I had no pain, yet I don't remember having it before the accident."

Watching her take a deep breath, I could see she was fighting her emotions, "Do you remember what happened before the wreck? Or did you really have amnesia?"

Hanging my head, "Yes. I could remember everything. But if I told people what had really happened, they would have locked me up in a padded cell." Looking back at her, I saw her swallowing. "Sheila, pull over somewhere. I don't want to get in another wreck."

Spotting a small public park, she pulled into a parking spot and stopped the car. Turning off the engine we sat there for a few minutes. Finally I opened the door. "Let's go sit at that bench by the water. I think it will be more comfortable than in here."

Getting out, I used the crutch with my right arm to support my weight. Walking around to the driver's side door, I opened it for her. I stood for a minute or so before she made up her mind to get out. Closing the door I followed Sheila as she mechanically walked over to the bench.

Not looking at me, she said quietly, "Tell me everything."

The question is, where to start. "Do you remember the dream you had this morning?"

Her head snapped around towards me. "You came into a hut and saw a strange looking man sitting at a table, furless except for on his head. Behind him a bear stood, her hands on his shoulders singing."

Her eyes got wide enough to show the entire pupil. Quietly I said slowly, "That wasn't entirely a dream."

I could see the emotions playing across her face, confusion, disbelief, astonishment, and panic. Taking her paw, I broke the train of emotions. Laying her palm against my muzzle I continued, "The bear you saw was Nanuk. She is my spirit guide. She is a force of nature that manifests in my dreams as a bear since that's the form that best represents her to me."

Her paw was trembling slightly. Lowering it from the side of my face, I held it tightly with both my hands to steady it. "What you saw in the dream was me. The old me, not this form I have now. When the amulet brought me here, it changed me somehow so that I would be able to fit in here."

I paused to let that sink in, eventually she looked back into my eyes, "Why did it bring you here? What reason could it have had?"

This was going to be tricky. "Have you ever heard of the idea that writers don't actually create the story, but are actually transcribing the events in another reality?" Thinking for a second she shook her head no. I tried to think of a way to explain, "There are millions of alternate realities, entire worlds sitting side by side occupying the exact same point in space and time, only they are somehow separated by a barrier that prevents people or objects from crossing. Our minds though, are immaterial, and some people have the gift for seeing what is beyond. Do you understand?"

As she nodded I continued, "Now imagine if the same thing worked for art too? The fantasy pictures that look so vivid and real are of people or events that actually occurred somewhere."

Slowly, she nodded again, "In my original world, I was depressed. I had lost some people very important to me. I didn't know how to move on. A friend gave me that amulet; she said that it would allow me to start my life over, but at a great cost. I would have to be willing to give up everything. I didn't believe her. Who believes in magic right?" She actually smiled a little at that. "I had a picture of you on my computer as the backdrop. Every time I saw you, I felt a longing in my heart. One morning I made the fateful mistake of holding the amulet while looking at you, and it brought me here."

Hearing that her eyes got wide again as she realized what I was saying. "In the hospital when I said you're the reason I'm here, it wasn't just some obsessed fan, it was the literal truth. My desire to be with you caused the amulet to bring me to you in this world."

Chuckling, I smiled, "Unfortunately for me, you and Zig Zag were in your car at the time. Not the best situation to be in, but then again, what can you expect from a cursed item that was fashioned by a demon hell bent on creating chaos."

I don't know how long we sat there. I just held her hand and waited for her to digest the information. In due course she asked in a weak voice, "And what about the guy in Kansas City?"

Shaking my head, "I don't know. My last name is Eastridge not Bearridge. The only thing I can think of is that it's either an incredible coincidence, or the amulet somehow caused the accident to get rid of my counter part in this reality. Either way, it has cost not only MY life and all I knew, but also that of my twin in this reality. Now you see why you and Zig Zag are so important to me. Without the amulet, I have no hope of ever getting back home. I can't just assume my alternates identity since he's dead. I'm a stranger in a strange land Sheila. You are my lifeline. You are what's keeping me going right now."

As we sat, I tried to relax. Listening to the birds singing, I felt a gentle breeze blowing through my fur. Looking down her hand as I held it in mine, "I don't know what to say."

With one hand, I lifted her muzzle so she looked me in the eye. "My old life is gone. Up until now, you thought it was amnesia. Now that you know the truth, does it make that

## Chapter 25

much difference?" Looking straight into her eyes, I prayed that she wouldn't send me away. "If you say you never want to see me again, I'll walk away. It's your decision."

Letting go of her, I used the crutch to help myself up. Walking back to the car I climbed into the passenger seat, and rolled down the window. She would have to make a decision one way or another. I only hoped that Nanuk was right, and she'd choose to stay with me.

# Chapter 26

It's not just a decision matrix, it's your brain

Sitting on the bench, Sheila tried to digest the information that Arden had told her.

He had known what she had dreamed this morning as if he were there. If what he was saying is true, then he really WAS there! Then there were her other dreams. Dreams where she wore a different form. Was this that spirit's way of letting her feel what he felt? That Nanuk?

And what about the amulet? The amulet of Lakesh he had called it.

Lakesh....

He had said that the demon was hell bent on spreading chaos. It had certainly succeeded here.

And why didn't she tell him she had the amulet? What had stopped her? Could it have been fear that he would use it to leave her? What was it that drew her to him? Was the amulet responsible for that or was that her true emotions. She believed him when he said he would never harm her, or allow her to be harmed. Equally she believed that if she told him to go, she'd never see him again.

Looking back at the car, she saw him sitting in the passenger seat, his head back on the headrest, staring out through the sunroof. But did she really want him to go? He was just getting fun. Fun?

Arguing with herself, she tried to figure out what to do.

*What the hell are you talking about girl? Fun?!? This guy isn't even really a bear! He's not even of this world if you believe what he says! How can you think about him being fun!*

*Well why not! What's to this life if you can't enjoy it! So what if he's from the Twilight Zone instead of Kansas. There's a powerful magnetism and you can't deny that. He's not some guy that's going to hump your leg just because you're in the business. He actually cares for you enough for it to have brought him to your world. That kind of man is special, no matter how you cut it, even if they aren't seven feet tall and built like a brick wall!*

*But what about the amulet, what if he finds it, and decides he's tired of playing with his furry sex toy and wants to go home? What will you do then? You going to go to his world and become a furless freak? Could you even imagine living in a world of people like that?*

*Is it any easier for him in our world? Where a fantasy suddenly is not only walking, and talking, but is also practically dry-humping him at every opportunity? No wonder the guy keeps turning us down. We're totally alien. A fantasy is one thing, but to actually follow through on it.... And to think that he broke through last night, he was actually ready to make love, and out of spite, was turned down. The poor guy's has got to be going nuts.*



*Maybe, but are you willing to risk getting hurt by him?*

He'll never hurt me. I know that now. I trust him, body and soul.

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Watching Sheila through the bottom of my glasses, I could see her looking over at me occasionally. She sat there for about fifteen minutes according to the clock. Finally she got up and walked over to the passenger side and opened the door. "Get out."

You could have heard my heart shatter from a block away. I just looked at her face; it was as if it had been chiseled out of granite. Getting my crutch, I climbed out and she closed the door behind me. As I turned to walk away, she grabbed the fur on my shoulder and pulled me around. Looking down at her, I saw her looking into my eyes, searching for something. The image was hard to see through the tears. Finally, standing on her tiptoes, she reached up and grabbed my ears. Pulling me down to her level, she spoke softly, "Don't ever leave."

Turning her head, she kissed me, hard. When the shock wore off, I dropped the crutch and wrapping my arms around her, lifted her from the pavement, never once letting my lips leave hers. An infinity later, she broke the kiss and leaned her head back, "I'm sorry, I understand now what you must have been going through. I've been horrible."

Setting her down, I shook my head, "I'm the one who lied from the beginning. I should have found some way to explain it to you before now, but I just didn't know one."

Hugging me hard enough to stretch some stitches, I bit down on a yelp before it could get out. Her head buried in my chest, she was crying softly, "It doesn't matter. None of it matters. It's all in the past. This is a new beginning for both of us."

Kissing her on her head, I spoke softly, "As much as I'd love to stand here in your embrace, I'd really appreciate it if you'd loosen your grip a little. I think you're pulling the stitches again."

Letting go, she backed up, looking up at me with those wide eyes, ears flat, "Oh no, I did it again."

Leaning back against the car with my tail, I held my breath with clenched fists as the pain abated. A few seconds later I had gained control and was able to breathe again. Looking at Sheila I smiled, bent down, and kissed her again. "Don't worry about it. In every relationship there comes some pain."

Ears still flat, she was close to crying again, "Yah, but why is it always me inflicting it?"

Giving her a hug, I couldn't help but laugh, "I guess I'm just lucky that way."

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Arriving at the doc's house, we saw a generic single story white house in a comfortable subdivision that had been built about twenty years or so ago. Knocking on the door, we were greeted by the doc's smiling face. "Ahhhh there you are my boy, and you brought

the ever beautiful Sheila with you. How are you're ribs doing my dear?" he asked as he waved us in.

Stepping into the house, I saw what could only be described as semi-organized chaos. That or some gangbangers had just gone through his house and trashed it. There were books everywhere, and in large stacks too. "I'm doing just fine, thank you doctor," she replied giving him a smile.

As he lead us into the kitchen, I saw that it was mostly devoid of books, though on the table I saw several old mythological related texts. It looks like the doc had been doing research again. "So, you managed to destroy your old plaster cast eh? Found out you weren't quite as healed as you thought?"

Sitting down, I smiled and shook my head. "Well, after busting the top of the foot on a rodents head, then half-way sawing it off after an argument, it was still holding up pretty well until I forgot to wrap it going into the shower today."

Putting some water on to boil, he laughed at the last. "I warned you about wrapping it. You need to pay more attention to me when I tell you these things my boy." Getting out a tea service, a can of tealeaves along with old-fashioned tea strainers to make them, he set everything out by the stove as the water heated. "I heard on the news about the break in this morning, it was a very bad thing to have happen. Of course you have no idea how relieved I was to hear that you wouldn't need me to fix you up again." Sitting at the table, he chuckled, "At least not until you called to tell me about the cast that is."

Glancing at Sheila, I could see that she wasn't happy hearing about the incident last night. Taking her paw, I kissed the back. As she smiled at me, I turned my attention back to the doc, "You know how it is doc. Right now I'm the new kid in town and am trying to work up my frequent hospital miles, you know?"

As we were chatting about general passing topics, the kettle began to whistle. Getting up, he poured the boiling water into the service pot. Placing cream, sugar and lemon on the tray, he then set everything down in front of us.

Taking a strainer, I scooped two teaspoons of tealeaves into it and slowly poured the water into the funnel shaped device. As it slowly trickled, I passed the pot over to Sheila. Inhaling the fragrance of the tea I was reminded of all the times I had sat with Lisa and talked about totemic history with her.

After draining the strainer, I set it back on the service. Pouring in some milk and adding sugar I stirred the mixture. "Say doc, did I ever tell you about my friend Lisa?"

Shaking his head, I continued. "She was the one that gave me the amulet before I crossed over." Seeing his eyes widen at this, quickly glanced between Sheila and myself. Understanding his discomfort, "It's alright doc, she knows everything."

Hearing that, Sheila asked, "You told him?"

## Chapter 26

Understanding her feeling of betrayal, I explained how the doc had recognized the mark on my hand, and of the loss of his father. Finishing the story, I related how he had translated his father's work for me. Understanding why the doctor knew, I could see her relax.

Turning back to the doc, I picked up and sipped the tea, "Mmmm. This definitely takes me back. You and Lisa have exactly the same taste in teas. Anyway as.."

The doctor interrupted me with an odd look, "What do you mean we have the same taste in teas?"

Shrugging, "This tastes almost exactly the way that Lisa liked to make it. Only she brewed the stuff strong. You could shellac wood with it when she was done."

He sat there, just shaking a little, "What was her last name?"

Thinking back, I tried to remember. I'm kind of screwy about names some times. "I think Graulman? Grollman? Something like that?" Visibly shaking now, you could hear the cup chattering against the platter he held. "What's the matter doc?"

Setting the tea down, he placed his hands on the table to stop the shaking. "This tea, it is a custom blend, taught to me by my father. When he would make it, he would run the water through the leaves several times to make it very strong."

Thinking back to Lisa, she did the same thing, "And he used 2 lumps of sugar, and placed a slice of lemon in the cup rather than twisting it?"

Nodding, I could see he was shaken, "My fathers name was Elijah. It is Hebrew for 'The Lord is My God.' Lisa, is Hebrew for 'Consecrated to God.' Graulman is the name they gave me when I first came to this country after the war, I changed it back to Grahl about twenty years ago."

As I sat back, I realized that the amulet had come full circle. His father, for whatever reason had been brought to my world as a woman after who knows how many changes. Befriending me, she gave me the amulet, knowing that it would let me start over. I wondered how many worlds he/she had been through. Finally, I looked back at him, "Assuming it is your father, and not someone like the guy in Kansas City is for me, an alternate, then you know that he's alive and well."

Nodding slowly, I saw a tear run down his face, "But I will never be able to see him again. After all this time, to find out he's alive....."

We sat and sipped tea in silence for a long time. Lakesh had once again struck, bringing chaos and sadness to someone.

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Shortly after Sheila and Arden had left to get his cast replaced, Zig Zag got a call from BullDog Security; the police were done over at Sheila's house. Asking them to leave someone at the site, she would come over and lock things up until Sheila was ready to

return. Pulling into Sheila's driveway, Zig Zag and James got out of the car. After a brief conversation with the guard who answered the door, entered the apartment.

Although the police had tried not to disturb the apartment much, Zig Zag saw coffee cups and plates sitting out on the counter and piled in the sink, thinking that there was more than one reason they were referred to as pigs by people. Walking back to the bedroom door, she hesitated to look in. The door was partially closed; revealing the pattern of bullets the intruder had fired through it thinking that Sheila or Arden had been on the other side. Shuddering thinking that it really could have been one of them, she started to reach for the door.

James put his hand on her shoulder, stopping her. "Don't." As she turned her head to him, he could see she was still haunted by what she saw this morning. "You take care of the dishes, I'll clean up in here." Nodding, she headed for the kitchen.

Pushing the door open, James saw a comfortable looking bedroom. The bed was thrown back on both sides, and there were some clothes on the floor. Just inside the door, the bullets that had been fired through the door, but missed the small mouse had chewed the carpet up. Further in, he could see a large, almost kidney shaped stain, as the blood from the two intruders had pooled together in the carpet. Looking to the far wall, he saw more blood from where Arden had smashed the mouse's head into the wall; a wide swath of blood traced the trail as his body had slumped to the floor. There was also the pepper pattern of the pellets that had missed the second intruder, their pattern forming an eerie silhouette of a formless ghost.

Closing his eyes for a second, James fought for control. Taking deep breaths to try to calm himself, he was aware of the smell of blood, still lingering in the air. By now it had soaked into the underlining. Opening his eyes, he walked over to the telephone by the bed. Picking it up, he got a dial tone. After getting the number from directory assistance, he called the Rug Rats Carpet Cleaners and asked them to send out a shampoo truck for the rug. Explaining the reason, they put him ahead of the other calls that had been scheduled for today. Cleaning it up would only take a few minutes.

Going into the bathroom, James got out a bucket and some detergent. It was time to straighten things up.

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As we drove back from the doc's place, I shifted my leg. He had used a fiberglass brace that covered the area below my knee. It was wonderful to be able to bend my leg again. Best of all it could be removed for when I needed to shower, or wanted to scratch. Such luxury!

Reading through the doc's book again, I studied the German side of the text. It had been over twenty years since I had learned German and could make little sense of it, but you could tell from how he wrote if he was excited, thoughtful or unemotional. I had a feeling the book would prove a turnkey item somehow. Closing the book, I looked over at Sheila. She looked wilted a little. "What's the matter love?"

## Chapter 26

Shaking her head, she drove on for a few minutes, and then decided to talk. "Even with the dream, I still didn't really believe any of it. It could all have been just a strange string of coincidences. But to listen to the doctor talk about his father and the amulet, it just hammered home that this was real."

Laying my head against the rest, still looking at Sheila, I placed my hand over hers as she rested it on the stick shift. "How do you think I felt? It was almost three days before I came to grips with the fact that I wasn't human any more. I had become something out of my fantasies, or maybe a nightmare."

"Human." The word was alien to her mouth, "That's what you were, human."

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Daniel Khansman was livid. He couldn't believe that things were going this bad. Not only was he indebt to the mob for getting two of their best hit min killed, but now this. Looking at the letter again, he reread it

Khansman,

This is to let you know that I have proof that you ordered the hits on the bear. Since the proof was gotten illegally, it won't stand up in court, however that doesn't mean that it won't do wonders for you in the media. If anything happens to him, or there is another attack, I will release everything I have to the media anonymously. That includes the tapes, phone records, everything. This is your only warning.

It was obviously unsigned, and was postmarked at the post office downstairs. He wasn't about to give it to the police to examine it. They would obviously read the text.

Crumpling up the paper, he placed it in the ashtray. Lighting it, he watched it burn. Nobody blackmailed Khansman and got away with it. The bear was safe, for now, but once he found out who had sent the letter, it was going to be open season on bears.

\*\*\*\*\*

Pulling into the parking lot at ZZ Studios, Sheila and I got out. Saying hi to the guards, we entered through the newly installed door. Once inside, Sheila found out from the receptionist that Zig Zag hadn't come in yet. Spying the cracked door at the end of the foyer, she took my hand, "I got someone I want you to meet." Dragging me over to the door, she banged on it roughly, causing it to swing open.

The interior of the room was dark, with large display on the desk facing the back wall, illuminating the form at the desk. Turning on the light, Sheila asked, "Geez, are you a skunk or a mole?"

With the light on, I could see it was a large skunk. As she turned around to face us I recognized her immediately. It was Sabrina. Smiling, she looked up at Sheila. "Hey Sheila, how you doing?"

Moving into the closet turned office, she plopped herself down on a pile of papers sitting on Sabrina's desk. "Sabrina, this is Arden. He's the guy that's been causing all the trouble around here."

Not moving, I just looked at her. Turning towards me in slow motion, I saw her smile and blink. Standing up, she reached her paw out towards me. Taking it, I felt the warmth of it as she grasped mine. Looking down, I could see that she was pregnant, but still early on. Smiling I gently kissed the back of her paw. "The pleasure is all mine."

She wiggled with a small shiver, the echoes running up her tail, "Ohhh, he is a gentleman. So the stories I heard aren't wrong." Turning back to Sheila, "So what's this I hear about you? Getting serious are we?"

I lost track of the conversation. All I could think about was Foxx's, Tabitha story line, and the fact that Sabrina was supposed to lose this first child. Overcome with emotion, I turned and left. Leaving the building, I turned left, and walked down the sidewalk a ways. Coming to an empty parking spot, I squatted and sat down on a cement wheel stop.

Burying my face in my hands, I tried to decide, 'Should I do something that could possibly alter what will happen, or do I let nature take it's course? Or will what Chris wrote even come to pass?'

After a few minutes, I felt a touch on my shoulder and Sheila asking quietly, "What's wrong?"

Still fighting for control, I just shook my head. I was in no shape to talk, and even if I were, what could I say?

At that moment, I would have given just about anything for a chance to strangle that bastard Lakesh.

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Having dropped Zig Zag off at the studio, James went over to his business. He'd been taking too much time off from the job. Walking directly to his office, he sat down and looked at the stack of papers on his desk. Sighing he was about to dive in when he heard a knock at the door. Looking up he saw Doug walk in. Taking a seat opposite of James, he stretched out his legs and tilted the chair back. "If it isn't the prodigal son. Where've you been Jim?"

Picking up the first folder on his desk, he glanced at the post-it note that was attached. Opening he responded distractedly, "I was helping Zig Zag clean up Sheila's apartment." Connecting the name, Doug sat up a little, "I heard about that on the news this morning. They said nobody was hurt. Was there much damage?"

Closing the folder, James tossed it back on top of the pile. Leaning back he took a deep breath. "Not really, just a door, one wall and some carpet. But that's enough to make her bedroom look like a small piece of Beirut." Letting out a low whistle, Doug waited for him to continue. "They were ruthless. One shot the other through the door with an automatic weapon thinking it was Sheila or Arden. It's a small miracle they're still alive."

Grunting acknowledgement, Doug changed the subject slightly, "What kind of damage was there?" Reaching again for the folder, then changing his mind, James just sat back. "There was the bedroom door, it was all shot up. The floor beyond the door was riddled

with bullet holes. The carpet was covered with blood; fortunately I got Rug Rats to come shampoo it. Then there was the wall. The security guard that killed the second one did it with a shotgun. You could see the outline of the scattered pellets that missed him. He unloaded an entire magazine of 10 gauge shotgun shell rounds into him. It wasn't later till I noticed that the shots through the door had ricocheted around in the room chewing up the bed and the walls. Zig Zag ordered a new bed for Sheila and I'll have to see about getting someone out to replace the rug and fix the walls. Mean time they're staying in the spare bedroom at Zig's."

Shaking his head, Doug took another look at James. "You look like hell Jim. Go home, I'll take care of this stuff for you." Reaching out he began to scoop up the folders. As James began to fight with him for the folders, he played his trump card, "Jim. Let go or I'll have to call Kelly. You don't want me to do that do you?" Kelly, Doug's wife, had become a surrogate mother hen to James since his own wife Beth had died. Surrendering to the threat, James backed away from the folders.

Giving his friend a hard look, Doug spoke in a British voice, "You will go home. You will rest. You will NOT come back to work until you are presentable, do you hear me James?" Snapping to attention, James gave a British salute, "Yes sir! Major General Sir!" Laughing at the old joke, between them Doug took the pile of work to his office.

After sitting back and relaxing for a second, James got up and headed for his car. He'd make a quick trip home, and then head back over to Zig Zag's. There were a few things he wanted to get from home, but hoped not to need.

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Having convinced Sheila that I would be all right, she had gone back in to talk to Sabrina. Sitting on the wheel stop, I let the sun soak into my fur, almost relishing the warmth, knowing I would have to be careful not to overheat. While I sat, one of the two guards stood near by, far enough to give me privacy, but close enough to intervene if something occurred. Still waiting for my emotions to sort themselves out, I saw James drive by and drop off Zig Zag. Putting on a cheerful façade, I gave a smile and waved to them. Waving back, Zig Zag headed in while James drove off to take care of business.

Soon I realized that I was starting to pant. I knew I was overheating and it was time to go in. Using my crutch to stand up, I felt the guard giving me a hand from behind. Thanking him I headed in.

Walking in, I saw that once again, Sabrina's door was mostly closed, but this time the light was on. Heading back, I knocked on the door, looking in as it swung open. As Sabrina turned around, I saw her smile, "Back for a second try?"

Nodding, I gave a weak smile, "Yah. If you don't mind, I'd like to start over." Chuckling she stood up and shook my hand, "That's all right. I'm used to having shy guys around, though they aren't too common here." Shy? She thought I was being shy? Seeing the confusion on my face she asked, "You were embarrassed by my zinging Sheila about having a new boy friend, right?" Laughing at the image, I found a place to lean against the wall. "No. It's not that. Although Zig Zag and Sheila would both accuse me of being so tight I squeak, I'm not that easily embarrassed."

Sitting back down, she gave me a curious look and waited for me to explain. Thinking fast, I used a variant on a theme, "You reminded me of someone I once knew. She was very dear to me. She was killed in a car accident some time ago."

Her face fell as if someone had knocked all the support out of her cheeks. "Oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't know." Waving her off, I explained, "It's OK. It was a long time ago. After the accident I've been having trouble remembering things. The sudden shock of seeing you brought the memory back to me. It could have been any good looking skunk walking down the road." Hearing the last, she smiled and almost blushed, "Thank you, but you still have my sympathies." Pushing that out of the way, we sat around and chatted for a little while, talking about her work, school, etc. All in all it was a wonderful experience. If only I could forget what I knew might be in store for her.

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Parking the car in the garage of his house, James headed inside and proceeded to the gun cabinet. Unlocking it he began to take down several handguns. One was a small .25 caliber ladies automatic that he had bought for his wife. Next he took down a .38 special revolver, followed by a 9mm Beretta. Lastly he took out the pride of his collection, a .454 Casull revolver. Opening the closet, he took out a large red plastic case. Upon opening it, the interior revealed itself to be textured foam rubber container designed to conform to whatever he put inside. Placing the pistols along with two extra clips for the automatics inside the case and closed it. Taking another red case, this one showed that the foam had been cut to hold boxes of ammunition. Placing a box of ammunition for each weapon inside, he closed and latched it. Locking the gun cabinet, he took the cases out to the Range Rover and locked them in the jack compartment by the spare tire.

Even though they had taken the precaution of having BullDog security at Zig Zag's house, you could never be too careful. If someone did manage to get in, James wasn't about to give up without a fight.

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After having a pleasant chat with Sabrina, I went looking for Sheila. Poking my nose into the spa area, I saw the flicker of a white tipped tail. I had found my prey. Sneaking in, I waited for it to twitch within reach then grabbed it with my hand. Giving it a little tug, I let go and stood back. I heard an indignant screech as the tail whipped out of sight, followed by an indignant fox coming around the corner. Standing toe to toe with me she looked up and growled, "What's the big idea?" It had been Tammy.

Note to self: When hunting Sheila, make sure that's who it is before you pounce.

Giving a lopsided grin, I cringed, "Sorry, I thought you were Sheila." Paws on her hips, she leaned forward, "Oh yah? And just who the hell are you to be pulling on her tail?" Huh? Has she been in a hole for the last week? "I'm Arden."

As the realization of what I said kicked in, she leaned back a little and smiled, "Oh, YOU'RE Arden." Giving me a good look up and down, she whistled, "Now I know what she sees in you." Turning back to head into the room, she shot over her shoulder, "Come on in, I was just looking for some ointment to help loosen up my shoulder." Following



her in, I looked around again. This was the same room that Sheila and Zig Zag had worked on me in to clean up the glass.

Slamming shut the door to the cabinet, Tammy stood rubbing her right shoulder with her left paw, "Why can't people put stuff back when they're through."

Walking up behind her, I carefully made sure NOT to step on that tail. Setting the crutch aside, I put both hand on her shoulders and began massaging them. She dropped her shoulders a little and started to relax. "Hey, you're pretty good at that." Letting go I suggested, "Lets do this right, climb up on the table."

Turning she gave me a very lecherous grin, "Whatever you say big boy, you're driving." As I heard her climb on the table, I opened the cabinet. Straightening things up that she had shoved around; I found some scented oils that would be perfect for doing a massage. Closing the cabinet I turned back towards the table.

Rather than just laying down on it, she was sitting on it tailor fashioned, facing me. That's when I realized that she wasn't wearing anything. Fur can be so deceiving at times. Walking over to the table, I tilted my head to the side and made a circular motion with my finger. "Hard to work on you're shoulders if you're facing me."

She gave a mock look of disappointment, she pouted, "Oh, that's all you want." As she turned around, I had her lay down on the bed. Pretty standard layout for a massage, all except for that tail of course. Beginning the massage at the shoulders, I worked the kinks out of the muscles in her neck and shoulder blades, then slowly moving down her back, I concentrated on the middle back and ribs, occasionally doing a long push up the back to stretch all the muscles in a run.

Working my way down to the buttocks, I remembered a little trick Sheila had taught me in the shower. It was the equivalent of what Zig Zag had done to me in the hospital. Smiling like a fool, I continued working down along the legs until I had her almost limp as a wet piece of toast. Slowly working my way back up, her legs again, I asked, "Are we relaxed?" If she had been a cat, I swear she would have purred. "Oh yes, that's wonderful." Continuing to massage around the base of the spine and the tail I asked with all innocence, "Want to feel even better?" Still in never never land, she dreamily replied, "Sure."

Reaching down along the tail by the base, I hit that soft spot that Sheila had shown me. If it felt anything like what Zig Zag did to me, this was going to get interesting. Tammy's eyes flew open and her ears perked strait up. Arching her back, she pulled her torso forward a good three or four inches on the table.

Turning to look at me, she shot me look that was a combination of revelation and accusation. Retrieving my crutch, I bent down so I was almost muzzle-to-muzzle with her. "Never tease the safe guys. You never know when they'll turn on you." Sticking out my tongue, I gave her nose a quick lick, straightened up, and wondered off, once again looking for Sheila.

Coming full circle to Sabrina's closet, I saw Zig Zag walking down the hall from the other direction. Pointing a finger, she said "Hey you! Freeze!" Standing absolutely still, I waited for Zig Zag. Stopping in front of me, she said, "I've been looking for you, let's take a walk." Turning she walked for the front door. Still standing immobile I waited. As she got to the door, she turned around, and with a puzzled look, said, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

Trying not to move, I muttered loudly, "You said to freeze."

Smiling she shook her head, "OK, Unfreeze, and let's go." Relaxing, I turned with a grin and headed for the door. As we went outside, she tapped one of the guards and headed across the parking lot. As I followed her, the guard followed me across the pavement. The building we were coming to was an industrial strip mall. There weren't any commercial storefronts per se, though when we got close, I saw a small sign that said "Philippe's Fur Extravaganza." Pulling the door open, she waved me inside.

Once inside I saw a very nicely decorated waiting area, beyond it was Philippe's work area with what looked like a chiropractors bed, a slightly different barbers chair, tub, shower, and several different types of dryers. As we came in, Philippe spotted us and approached us, "Zig Zag, and my latest work of art, how are you both?" Walking up he gave Zig Zag a kiss on each cheek, then turning to me, gave me a look that almost shouted 'Bend over lummo so I can greet you properly.' Bending down, he smiled and kissed me on both cheeks. The formalities complete, he asked Zig Zag, "And what can Philippe do for us today?"

Hooking a thumb at me, "Arden here needs you to do his other leg. Also, he needs a little touch up on the back," Zig Zag explained. Walking around behind me, I felt him tugging on the fur with a brush, "OUCH! Stop that please." Peering around from behind me he looked up, "What is the problem?" Looking down at him, I asked, "Didn't you hear about the shooting the other day?"

Nodding, he explained, "I saw all the police, and Tammy said that there had been a drive buy shooting, but that nobody had been hurt." Shaking her head, Zig Zag intervened, "That's not quite true. Nobody was *seriously* hurt, thanks to Arden. Sheila and Clarence were out front with him when it happened." Hearing this, Phillip gasped, covering his muzzle with his paw. "Fortunately for us though, Arden tackled them to the ground while shielding them with his body. The bad part is that he not only got several large cuts from the falling glass, but also took five bullets in the back."

His eyes open wide, he reached out as if to be sure I was real, "And we are walking around today? We are the hero! Philippe is honored to work on us today. Come and lay down. Philippe will work on you without making the pain. Philippe promises."

Following him over to the large bed, he hit a button on the bottom and it tilted upright. As I stood on the platform at the bottom, He leaned it forward till it was flat. Taking a spray bottle, he began to spray my fur with a pleasant smelling liquid that helped him brush out the tangles without pulling.

As he worked on my back Zig Zag pulled up a chair, "We've got to talk kiddo." Smiling, I shrugged, "You've got a captive audience." Leaning back, she crossed her legs. "I've got to figure out what I'm going to do with you. Staying with Sheila's all nice and fine, but we need to think about how to make you a productive member of our little clan." Nodding, I was in total agreement, "No camera's right?" Giving a small leer, she acquiesced, "For now anyway. The question is, what do I do with you?"

Pulling my arms out from under my ribcage, I used them to prop my snout up. It was harder to breathe this way, but I didn't think I'd be getting too many shocks. "Well, I'm strong, so once the cast comes off and my stitches come out, I can help with the scenery I suppose. That and I'm a pretty good masseuse if Tammy's any indication." Zig Zag raised an eyebrow at that last part and waited for an answer. I just lay there with a sly look in my eyes and a contented grin on my face.

Seeing she wasn't going to get any satisfaction from me, she just shook her head, "OK, you're big, strong and have good hands. Anything else?" Thinking about it, I thought it could be safe enough, "I remember sitting in front of a video editing system." Making a mental note, Zig Zag filed the information away for future reference. Leaning close, she asked in a conspiratorial voice, "Last question, were you serious this morning?"

Huh? Serious about what, "I'm not sure what you're referring to Zig Zag." Grinning like a cat, she was enjoying the confusion. "In the shower, the invitation, were you kidding, or were you serious?" Needing to get some air, I wedged my arms back up under the sides of my ribs. "Yes, I was. Any day, any time." Straightening up, she gave a little nod. I'm not sure if it was approval or something else. "I've decided to loosen up on my own. I'm not going to cut all the ropes, but I figure it wouldn't hurt to enjoy life some."

Standing up, she put the chair back over by the wall. "Come on back and see me when Philippe's done with you and we'll work out the arrangements." As she walked by, I felt her trailing a claw down the middle of my back. As a precautionary measure, I clamped my tail down hard. Giving a sinister chuckle, she headed out the door and across the street.

Dealing with Sheila was going to be a challenge enough. Having Zig Zag tossed into the mix was going to be downright entertaining. I just hoped that James could handle some friendly flirting. Who knows, maybe the three of us could loosen James up.

# Chapter 27

A productive member of the team?

Philippe had done a good job of cleaning up the fur on my back and saving the pattern as well as evening up my right leg so it matched the left. Over all I had to admit the little guy had a talent for fur. Afterwards I had continued my discussion with Zig Zag. Until the doc said that I had a clean bill of health, I could do double duty. I'd apprentice in the video editing studio and do massages. Tracy, their old masseuse had recently gotten engaged to a nice young Doberman who unfortunately had flipped when he finally found out where she worked. Since no qualified replacement had been found willing to work there, she'd give me a try. Since it was only a part time job, I'd use the time in video to fill in the clock.

Having spent about an hour in the video production room with Tony getting introduced to the equipment, I was duly impressed. Not with the equipment, though it was reasonably new, but the fact that it didn't do half the funky stuff that my Video Toaster/Flyer could do. I was impressed that despite what they had to work with, they still managed to throw together some good quality video. I suppose I'd have to see if NewTek existed in this world. If so, maybe I'd be able to track down a VT/F unit.

After spending time in there, one of the actors, Leon, came in and got me. Zig Zag had told him to give me a try. I'd spent the rest of the afternoon working bodies over. By five o'clock my hands were ready to cramp. It was a relief when Sheila stuck her head in and said it was time to go. Zig Zag was driving, and unless I wanted to walk back to her place, I'd better move.

Cleaning up, I took note of the bottles I'd emptied that day. I had no clue how much stuff there was to take care of fur. Michelle had fifteen different bottles for her hair, but that was just her following marketing hype. Here there were the regular conditioners for fur, but also for specific types of fur. Long, short, thick, thin, oily, dry, combination and then you got into the odd ball stuff like anti-pest oils, scented oils, etc. I had learned a new respect for Philippe. Next chance I got, I was going to spend some time with that little guy and get some fur care tips.

Sitting in the front seat of Zig Zag's car, we were headed back to her house when she spoke. "So what did you think of editing?" Honest, or lie? I decided on honesty, "Looking at that stuff reminded me of the editing I did at home. I must say I'm impressed with the quality of the work considering what you have to work with." Giving me an odd look she asked me to clarify, "Don't get me wrong, it's nice equipment, but I didn't see any readily available chroma-key functionality incase you wanted to do blue or green screen backdrops, the transition and fade functions are very limited, and I saw only four different types of wipe effects. The non-linear editing system was very nice, but it couldn't assemble the audio and video clips in real time, and wasn't good at overlaying multiple tracks independent of the video tracks. The text generator is pretty good, but with only thirty fonts, and no ability to download custom fonts onto it, is pretty limited."

For about 5 seconds she stared at me. I pointed out the window and said, "You also might want to stop for this light up ahead." Snapping her head around, she hit the breaks. We had plenty of time to stop, but there's no sense in pushing it. Once stopped, she

looked at me again, "You remember all that?" Shaking my head, I shrugged, "Not exactly, I just looked for the functionality on the equipment. When I couldn't find it, Tony told me it wasn't there. I know I used to do that kind of stuff with what I had at home. It just surprised me that you couldn't do it."

Looking back to the stop light, she thought for a few seconds, "Well, we really don't have much call for the kind of stuff you're talking about. Our needs are pretty simple if you know what I mean."

Nodding in agreement, I set out to expand her horizons, "Ever thought of doing a fantasy one? Set in medieval times, or maybe in space? How about in an underwater dome on some alien planet? That kind of stuff you could do with a good green-screen chroma-key system. Find a good 3D graphics rendering package that is compatible with your non-linear video system and you've got something to create those fantasy backdrops. They don't have to be static either. Imagine having your people on a space station, the earth passing by in the window behind you? Sounds expensive, but it wouldn't be."

As I had been talking, she nodded, "I see what you mean, there's a lot of possibilities for that. We could shoot backdrop video in remote locations and put our people in front of it." Now she was getting the idea! "How much would something like that cost?" Time to play dumb. "Sorry, I don't know. I just remember doing it. Why not let Tony and me look into the cost of getting the equipment and have the vendors send their promo tapes. Give us a good idea of what their stuff will do." Nodding, I could see her thinking it over. If she went for it, it would set a new standard in the industry. The possibilities were endless. Doing that would be a lot more fulfilling than helping out in video and doing massages. Relaxing in the seat, I spent the rest of the trip home trying to think of new and imaginative ways to use 3D animation in the blue film industry.

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Getting back to Zig Zag's, I helped carry in the groceries we had picked up on the way home. Zig Zag and Sheila had drawn a lot of stares, but unfortunately my media coverage hadn't done anything for my anonymity. I had people asking if I was the guy on TV, did I really get shot, what really happened last night, and to my surprise, for my autograph. Looking to Zig Zag and Sheila for support while getting mobbed, I saw them just sit back watch, amused as the new guy went through the ringer. All in all I think it was a positive experience as a lot of people told Zig Zag and Sheila that they were sorry to hear about our bad fortunes on the news.

Once we had put everything away, I was ready to try to relax, "Zig Zag, I'm gonna take a hot shower and try to unwind a little." Getting out a wine cooler, she poured herself a drink, "Why a shower when we have a Jacuzzi?" What can I say? I'm not used to having a Jacuzzi at home. "No reason I guess, though I don't remember seeing bathing suits in either over-night bag." Taking my arm, Sheila gave Zig Zag a little wink, "Who needs trunks when you're with friends?" Looks like they were going to call my bluff from this morning.

After taking a quick shower to get rid of excess oil and grime, we saw that Zig Zag had laid out some swimsuits for us. It occurred to me that they might have been more for James than for either of us. Putting them on, we headed for the atrium.

Looking around in the atrium, we eventually found the control box. Turning on the timer, we switched it from 'timed' mode to 'on' and climbed in. Adjusting the jets so they wouldn't beat on the sore spots, I leaned back and relaxed. After a few minutes, Zig Zag came in with a tray containing a pitcher of lemonade and a bottle of sparkling wine in a bucket of ice. Taking our orders, she passed out the drinks then left the atrium to return in a few minutes wearing a thong bikini and carrying a towel.

James is one lucky dog.

Sheila saw the look on my face as I watched Zig Zag come in and kicked me in the water. Looking over I saw that she wore a mock glower. Feigning innocence I defended myself, "Hey, I'm supposed to look. It's in the Guy Book of Rules." Settling in, Zig Zag picked up her glass and responded, "Yes, but you're not supposed to get caught." Admitting defeat, I put my forearms in front of the jets and tried to relax as they beat the tension out of my muscles.

Picking up a remote control the size of a thin paperback from beside her seat, she asked what we'd like to hear. Since she didn't have any Kotke in her collection, we settled on some classical Vivaldi.

As we listened to the music, we discussed ideas for some future projects that used the new video system she'd get, her terminology not mine. Once Zig Zag made her mind up to do something, she did it. Now to find out if any of the stuff I'm used to working with existed in this world. I could only hope that LightWave or AnimationMaster existed in this world or it would be back to basics in learning a new product.

While we were talking, James showed up carrying a couple of bright red plastic boxes. After giving Zig Zag a kiss, he promised to join us. About five minutes later he entered the room, towel in hand wearing a bathing suit. Scowling I took my shot, "James! Trunks? At Zig Zag's?"

As he looked at the three of us he saw that Sheila and I were grinning like idiots while Zig Zag had a 'hey, it's me,' look on her face. Frowning, he turned and walked out. Zig Zag shot us a confused look, and moved towards the steps. Beating her to them, I climbed out and went to the door. I could see James stalking down the hall towards the bedroom, "Hey James!" Turning he glared angrily at me. Pointing down to the bright blue trunks I wore, "It was just a JOKE James!" He just stared at me. "Come on James, I'm sorry, it was bad taste." Reluctantly he shook his head and came back to the atrium. Climbing back in, I heard James following me in.

After getting Sheila and myself a refill, I realized that I had totally misjudged the guy. Having read Bruner's story on him, I had been overconfident about how he would react. There was a lot that I didn't actually know about him. After a few tries, I got James to talk about himself. All in all, it was quite informative and enjoyable soak.

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Climbing out of the dryer, I was getting dressed when James knocked and stuck his head in, "Hey, when you've got a couple of minutes, I need to see you in the master bedroom, ok?" Nodding, I dug out a shirt, "Sure, just give me a few seconds." After putting the shirt on, I strapped on the brace and walked across the hall to Zig Zag's.

James was doing something with the cases on the bed, "Close the door, ok?" After closing them, I turned back to see him holding an automatic pistol at his side. Swallowing my stomach, I put my hands up, "Hey James, man, take it easy, it was only a joke!"

Cocking his head slightly, he gave me a curious look. Keeping my hands up, I tried to keep a cheerful smile on my face, "We were just playing with you. I swear man. Nothing to get bent over." As I nodded to the gun, he held it up in front of himself for a second then realized what I was talking about. Laughing he waved his other hand, "I'm not going to shoot you." Locking open the breach, he held the empty pistol out to me, "Do you know how to shoot one of these things?"

Relief flooded into me. Taking the pistol, I saw that it was a Beretta 9MM model 98FS semiautomatic pistol. Releasing the slide lock, I closed the chamber. Holding it in a two handed firing pose, I checked the feel of the weapon. I knew it was a heavier weapon than my Glock at home was, but it felt like a toy in my hand. Fingering the trigger, I found the guard was a bit tight for my finger, but not unsafe. Relocking the chamber open, I handed it back. "Sure, standard semiautomatic pistol. A little small for my hand, but that's not a big problem." Waving it off, he handed me two loaded clips and the box of ammo. "I don't know who is after you, or why. But I don't want to have to worry about someone attacking you here and not being able to defend yourself."

Taking a smaller .38 special out, he loaded it; "This is small enough that you can put it in the glove compartment of which ever car you two are taking." Taking out a leather pistol case, he unzipped it and put the pistol in. "Keep it in the case and for god's sake don't flash it around." Accepting the case, I nodded, "I may have amnesia, but I'm not stupid."

Nodding, he then handed me a .25 caliber ladies gun with some clips and ammo, "This is for Sheila. Since you know how to shoot, take her down to this gun club." Handing me a card, I examined it. He had put his name and member number on the back. "Make sure she knows how to use it."

Shifting everything to one arm, I asked, "What about you? Who's to say someone won't come after you or Zig Zag?" Smiling he reached around and pulled out the biggest damned revolver I'd ever seen. If it had been any bigger, he would have needed wheels. Giving a low whistle, I looked it over, "That thing would stop a truck." Nodding, he took it back, "Or a bear." Seeing the look on my face, he continued, "Just in case whoever's responsible for this sends someone out a little tougher than the last two."

Glad that I wasn't the one he was referring to, I again thanked him. Taking the stuff back to the room, I put the 9MM under the pillow on my side of the bed, and the rest in the

overnight bag under all the clothes. I didn't know how Sheila was going to react to this, but I hoped it would be something she would accept without a fight.

\*\*\*\*\*

After dinner, we had watched a movie on Zig Zag's entertainment center. Last time I had seen a setup of this quality was a picture of the one in George Lucas's house. Who knew that Jack Nicholson would really turn out to be a wolf, eh?

Burned out from the day, I lay back on the bed with my legs hanging over the edge, arms spread eagle. Hearing Sheila come out of the bathroom, I tried to summon up the energy to sit up, but my body just didn't want to cooperate. Next thing I knew, Sheila had jumped up on the bed and landed on my stomach, straddling me and knocking the wind out of me. I let out a "Woof" of wind. Leaning down, she put her head on my chest and I lay there sucking air.

"What's it like not to have fur?" she asked quietly. Thinking, I answered back, "Well, we're not entirely furless. Although the majority is on our heads, we do have some very sparse fur on the rest of our bodies. Generally men have thicker fur than women, but we're still close enough to be furless from your perspective." She gave a little shudder, "It sounds horrible,"

Wrapping my arms around her, I gave a little hug, "It's not all that bad. You have a lot less maintenance than with a full body of fur. I used to be able to take a shower in ten minutes, fifteen tops if I took my time. Now it takes me at least forty five minutes without help, and it's a major pain to shampoo my back. Not to mention drying off. I used to be able to towel down to a dry state in less than two or three minutes."

Turning her head so her muzzle faced me, she rested it in the center of my chest, "Still sounds, I don't know, icky." Leaning my head to the side a little, I gave her nose a quick lick, "I don't know, its not all that bad. Having five fingers on each hand doesn't hurt either when typing."

Lifting her head up, she cocked it to the side, "Five fingers?" Nodding, I held up my paw, "There should be one more little one on the outside. I feel like I've lost two fingers and toes in this body."

Putting her head back down on my chest, she thought about it for a little bit, "Wow, that's rough. I didn't event think about that. Is there anything else you had that you don't?" Shaking my head no, "That's it. I know a lot of people in my world would love to have tails, but now that I have one, I'm not impressed."

Laughing, she ran her claws lightly across my ribs, tickling me, "That's not a tail, that's a stump. You need a *real* tail," she retorted, waving her tail around over her head for emphasis. Slowly rubbing her hands through the fur on my chest, she closed her eyes, "How's your back doing?" Shifting a little, I felt the sore spots on my back rub the sheet, but they weren't painful, just an ache, "As long as you don't try to hug me to death, it will be fine."



Sitting up, she slid down my body a little, "Don't worry, you won't have to strain your back at all." So much for going to sleep early, it was going to be a very interesting night.

\*\*\*\*\*

Walking into Nanuk's hut, I saw her sitting at the table. Sitting down across from her, I placed my elbows on the table, and rested my chin on my paws. Crossing her arms she smiled, "Nanuk was right?"

Nodding, I smiled, "Nanuk was right."

We sat there like that for a couple of minutes. I was just enjoying life as I knew it. Finally she asked me, "Do you want your old life back?" The question hit me like a physical blow. Sitting up, I thought about it. I had given up on my old life. I was finally happy with who and what I was, I didn't know if I wanted to go back or not. Shaking my head with confusion, "I don't know Nanuk. I had almost given up hope of ever going back."

Uncrossing her arms, she leaned towards me across the table, "Someday soon, you may get the opportunity to go back. You must decide now if you want to go, and if you do, you must be aware of how doing so will effect those you interact with."

Sheila, she was talking about Sheila. She had finally accepted who and what I was. If I went back, what would happen to her? Could she go, and if so would she even want to?

Laying my head on the table, my paws underneath, I considered my fate, and if I would ever take the return ticket if it were offered.

\*\*\*\*\*

Khansman sat at his desk reviewing the morning arrest report from the previous day. Rubbing his eyes, he tried to focus on the report again. He had not slept well after receiving that blackmail note yesterday; someone pursuing him haunted his dreams. It was not a feeling he enjoyed, and he would have to correct it as soon as possible.

Returning to the report, he flipped to the next page he spotted something that caught his attention. They had arrested a young raccoon from the gang that had done the hit on Nanuk, but had released him on a technicality. The interesting point is that they released him *before* anyone from the DA's or PD's office had told them too, and that's not like the cops. They prefer to let the guy sweat as long as possible, hoping to squeeze something out of him. Is it possible that the young Raccoon had spilled the beans?

Making a note to James, he listed the arresting detective's names. He would want to talk to them and get to the bottom of it.

\*\*\*\*\*

Waking up slowly, it felt like I had someone sitting on my chest, it was hard to breathe. Opening my eyes, I looked down and saw that I did. Sheila was sprawled out on my chest, hand folded under her head, sleeping quietly. Inhaling, I caught the thick musky smell of our scents from last night. Chuckling, it occurred to me that Zig Zag and James probably smelled it too. As I lay there, I remembered our conversation afterwards.

*Sheila let out a little giggle, "That was fun," as she lay on me, idly drawing circles in my chest with one claw. Taking a deep breath, I let out a sigh, "I knew it." She looked at me quizzically, "What?" Looking down at her with my best sad puppy dog eyes, "I knew it. I knew I was just a big, fluffy plaything. First I'm your dress-up toy, and now I'm just a sex toy." For a few seconds she had a shocked look on her face, until she noticed that I was having a hard time fighting a smile, then she gave me a wicked look, "You have a problem with being my 'big fluffy play toy'?" Giving up the act, I smiled and shook my head.*

*Still looking at me, Sheila got a serious look on her face. I could see that she was trying to decide something. After a couple dozen heart beats, she asked, "Arden, do you have a problem with my work?" That surprised me. After all we'd been through, she wasn't sure? "To be absolutely honest, and obeying the Guy Book of Rules, I'd have to say yes." Seeing the disappointed look on her face, I continued, "What guy isn't going to be a little jealous about his girl? It's built into us. We can't help it." Nodding, she put her head back down on my chest. "However, out of self preservation, you have no fear that I'll try to talk you out of working at Zig Zag's." I saw her ears pick up, "If you had this kind of energy every night, you'd wind up killing me within a month," I finished with a smile.*

*I could still see it was bothering her, "Sheila, you have to be you. I knew before I even came to this world what you did. I've even done work in the blue video industry in my world, though not in front of the camera. Yes, on some base level it may bother me, but I won't let it control how I feel for you or treat you." Reassured, she smiled and turned her head to the side.*

*Just about the time I thought she had fallen asleep, I heard her ask quietly, "Would you sing that song for me again?" Stroking the fur on her back, I began to sing Nanuk's song of motherly protection, wrapping her in notes of security.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Detectives Smith and Jones stood nervously in front of the DA's desk as he perused the folder before him. "Gentlemen, I see here that the ballistics test you ran on the recovered weapon, showed that it was the one used in the drive by shooting." Smith, clearing his throat, "One of the weapons."

Hearing this, Daniel raised an eyebrow. "Upon examining the bullets recovered from the scene, the bears back and the spent casings on the ground, we determined that both 9mm and .45 caliber weapons were used."

Nodding, he continued reading, "It also says here that he was released only three hours after being arrested. He hadn't even talked to his lawyer yet." Looking up, "That's not normal procedure, is it?"

Glancing between them selves, Jones answered this time, "Well sir, we discovered after the fact that there was a typo on the search warrant. Knowing that it would be thrown out, we were going to let him stew in the tank until his PD sprung him, but we had an offer we couldn't quite refuse." Slightly waving his hand, Daniel motioned for him to continue. "The new guy, Michael Jones offered to handle all the paperwork and reports on the case if we'd hand it over." Giving the DA a sheepish smile, he shrugged.

## Chapter 27

Closing the folder, Khansman leaned back, "So the rookie is responsible for this, anomaly." They both nodded in agreement. Giving a small smile of satisfaction, Daniel excused them. "Thank you gentlemen. You have helped clear up the discrepancy."

After they left, he turned his chair towards the window and leaned back. A critical key had fallen into place. He'd have to talk to his boy in the gang and have them check up on the raccoon's early release.

# Chapter 28

Hostilities remembered, hostilities resumed.

*It was Michael's one-year anniversary on the force. After today, he would no longer be referred to as rookie. Sitting at the outdoor table in front of the Italian café, Michael sat holding hands across the table with Natasha, a young Russian Blue cat. Her sensuous eyes locked onto his keeping him mesmerized. She had been the one to help him build his new life after the accident. His loss of memory left him aimless, but she had taken him in, nurtured him, encouraged him when he decided to join the police and supported him during his troubled times in the academy and as a rookie. Now that he had made the grade, they were celebrating in style. If the investigation he was pursuing on the side turned out to follow through, then he would get the credit for one of the biggest busts in the last decade.*

*To make the day perfect, he was about to propose to the woman he loved. Standing he walked around to her. Taking her hand, he slipped the ring on her finger. As he began to quickly kneel down, he was struck from behind and thrown forward, knocking Natasha over and winding up on the ground. In shock, he found he was unable to move his left shoulder. Looking down, he saw the crimson stain as the blood pumped from the gaping wound in his chest. His eyes drifted over to Natasha where they were riveted with horror at the sight. The high caliber bullet which had struck his shoulder and been deflected into her. As he watched, the pool of blood flowing from her body crept towards his own expanding pool, eventually allowing their life's forces to mingle.*

*Pulling his eyes from the blood back to her body, he watched as her chest heaved, trying to breathe in the air, only to spasm one last time, and then collapsed as her spirit fled the mortal cocoon which had been Natasha.*

Jerking upright in bed, Michael gasped for breath. Reaching to his left shoulder with his hand, he felt the ragged scar that had been left as a result of the assassin's bullet. With adrenaline flowing through his system, he was unable to control the shaking in his hands. Knowing that he would not be able to get to sleep again, Michael got out of bed and headed for the bathroom. The one question on his mind was 'Why, after all this time should the dream return?'

\*\*\*\*\*

Just about the time my bladder was going to declare its independence, I felt Sheila stirring. With a small moan, she opened her eyes and looked around, finally locking on to my silly grinning mug, "Did I sleep here all night?" She bounced a little as I laughed, "You sure didn't crawl up here in your sleep." Nodding, she smiled back, "Not bad. You're a little lumpy and kind of hard in spots, but you make for a good mattress." Giving a nonchalant shrug, I retorted, "And here I thought a hard man was good to find." Giving me that mischievous grin again, she dug her claws into my sides, causing me to practically levitate off the bed, "OK! I give! You win."

Finally catching my breath, I gave her a little nudge, "If you don't mind, I need to get up." Flopping flat on my chest again, she let out a low moan, "I don't wanna move." Lucky for me, she didn't have a chance at pinning me down. Slipping my legs off the bed, I held onto her and sat up, letting her slide down onto my lap. Swiveling I then laid her on the bed and got up and headed for the bathroom.

## Chapter 28

As I stood relieving myself, Sheila walked up behind me and began to lightly run her claws through my fur, combing it. "Too bad I'm not a cat, you'd make a *wonderful* scratching post!" Shaking it off, I replied, "Just what I need, more stitches." Turning around, I gave her a quick kiss and then headed back out to the bed. As I walked out, I heard her say, "By the way, your back looks like it's healing up pretty nice. I noticed there wasn't any blood in the bed this morning."

Taking off the splint, I grabbed the crutch. Walking back into the bathroom and over to the shower, "That's just because you haven't been abusing me properly. You've been slacking." As I turned on the shower, I felt her claws on my back again, only harder this time, "That can be corrected." Trying not to flinch at the occasional sharp pang, I waited until the water was the right temperature and then stepped in. Picking up medicated shampoo, I held it out for Sheila, "As long as you're raking my back, how about being productive too?"

Giving a mock glower, she stepped in and closed the door. As she lathered up my back, I got to thinking. "Sheila, how long as Sabrina been pregnant?" Laughing, she asked, "What? What are you talking about?" Confused, I turned to her, "Isn't she pregnant?" Turning me back around, Sheila laughed again, "No! She's just bloating a little. It's her time of the month." Relief flooded through me for a second until I realized that she might just have not told anyone at work yet. "Who's her boyfriend?" Giving me a not too soft punch in the ribs, Sheila shot back, "Hey, no double timing on me. Not unless it's in front of the camera!" Nodding, I agreed, "I know, but remember my background, I just want to know who's she's going with so I have my facts straight." Finished with my back, she got out the regular shampoo and began on my legs, "I think some guy named Chris, but I'm not sure."

Satisfied that I had things in order, I turned around after Sheila finished up my legs. Taking some shampoo in my hand, we spent the rest of the shower just enjoying ourselves.

\*\*\*\*\*

Answering his cell phone, Daniel hit the 'Do Not Disturb' button on his desk phone, "This is Khansman".

Young voice: "This is Mike. Got what you wanted."

Daniel smiled, "Excellent, what did you find out?"

Young Voice: "It took some work, but we found out the idiot talked."

Daniel was no longer smiling, "How bad is it?"

Young Voice: "That you ordered it and why."

Cursing he almost threw the phone against the wall, but he stopped himself, "What have you done with him?"

Young Voice: "Nothing yet, I wanted to check with you first."

## Chapter 28

At last, someone with intelligence that knew how to do things right, "Make an example of him. Make it very public. I want it as a warning to any who betray me."

Young Voice: "You got it. He'll be plastered all over the five o'clock news."

Giving a nod, "Excellent."

Young Voice: (chuckling) "For the next week that is."

He had imagination too, this was good, "I can hardly wait."

Hanging up the phone, he leaned back in his chair. 'I wonder what the little rat's going to come up with this time.' Amused, he spent a little while thinking about it, then turned and went back to work.

=====

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I brushed Sheila's fur as she sat on my leg. I was trying to figure out how to approach the subject of the pistols that James had given us. I decided the indirect approach might not be a bad idea. "Just out of curiosity, have you ever taken any kind of self defense class." I could feel her stiffen at the question, "Not really. I've never had to. I've always been able to rely on my natural abilities to get me out of a scrape with most people."

Putting the brush aside, I wrapped my arms around her, and put my muzzle down by her ear, speaking quietly I continued, "With everything that's happened lately, I don't want to risk anything happening to you. Will you think about letting me teach you how to defend yourself?"

Putting her head down, I could almost feel the conflict inside of her, I was asking her to give up some of the innocence that she was fighting to maintain. Finally she nodded, not speaking. Giving her a tight hug for a second, I kissed the top of her head, then picked up the brush and started working again.

"Last night, I talked to James and he loaned me some pistols." Hearing this, she turned her head and looked at me. Turning it back around, I continued brushing, "One of them is a small ladies .25 caliber pistol, small enough to fit in your hand bag. Today, we're going to go to a private gun range that he's a member of and I'm going to teach you how to use it." Shivering, she hugged herself, "I don't like guns." Stopping again, I put my hand on her shoulder, "You don't like what guns can do to people, I can understand that. I don't like it either. But I've come to enjoy the skill and challenge of learning to use a gun accurately. I hope I never have to use a gun against someone again, but if I do, I want to be the one walking away from the fight." Stroking her fur again, "If you ever get in a situation where you need to defend yourself or me, I want to be sure that, if nothing else, you are able to walk away from it. I can't do that unless you're willing to set your fears aside and truly learn how to defend yourself."

Working the fur on her tail, I waited for her to think about what I had said. I almost missed it when she spoke in a small voice, "Have you ever shot anyone?" Concentrating

on the brush, I tried to answer in a steady voice, "Yes, once. He was using a baseball bat on his girlfriend in front of their apartment." Shivering again, she curled up a little, "How can people do those kinds of things?" Putting the brush down again, I pulled her to me and held her, "I don't know. Although I'll have to live with the memory of what I did, I'll never be sorry for doing it. He'll never beat on anyone again, especially not his girlfriend or kid."

Rocking her back and forth, I held on to her, wishing that I could have protected her from all of this, but knowing that could never happen. There was a big bad world out there, and sooner or later, we all had to face life and all its consequences.

\*\*\*\*\*

After getting dressed, I headed out towards the kitchen. Upon getting there, I saw James pouring some coffee, "Morning James, how'd you sleep last night?" Giving me a sly smile, he grinned, "About as well as you two did I suppose." It took me a second to remember the smell. Having a musk would definitely take getting used to.

Looking in the fridge, I took out a carton of eggs, some mushrooms, a bag of grated cheese, sandwich ham, bacon and butter. As I piled it on the center counter, James informed me, "You know, Zig Zag and I usually just grab a sandwich on the way in." Nodding, I turned on the stove, and set a pan on with a small square of butter on it. Turning to the breadbox, I got out a loaf of sourdough bread and loaded the toaster while setting it to dark but not carbonized. Wrapping the bacon in paper towels, I popped the bacon into the microwave.

Once the butter melted, I started making a large, six egg omelet. As the toast popped, I set it aside and set in another four slices. Getting ready to close the omelet, I took out the bacon and crumbled it into the omelet along with the cheese. After dicing the ham and mushrooms quickly with a knife, I added them to the omelet and folded it over. Getting down four plates, I placed two slices of toast on each. Cutting up the omelet into four parts, I put one on each of the plates. Remembering the last part, I rooted around in the fridge again and found some Miracle Whip. Slathering on a liberal dose to each sandwich, I closed and cut them in half just as Zig Zag walked in.

Looking at the small mess I had made, she finally saw the sandwiches, "You made breakfast?" Giving her a 'DUH' look, I replied, "I may be a male, but I do know how to cook." Taking the offered sandwich, she continued, "Who's going to clean this up?" I nodded, "I'll do it. It's just one pan, a knife, spatula and a couple of plates. No big deal." Shaking her head, she took a bite of the sandwich, and after chewing on it, smiled, "Mmm... Not bad. Ok. You've got kitchen privileges, but next time ask first." Watching her take another bite, James decided that it must be safe, and picked one up, taking a bite, he too nodded approval.

As the three of us munched our breakfasts, Sheila finally joined us. Pointing to the sandwich, I told her, "If you don't hurry up, someone's likely to steal it." As Zig Zag slowly reached for it, Sheila snapped her muzzle in an imitation bite and quickly grabbed the sandwich.

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Sitting down at his desk, Michael unlocked the screen saver on his computer and checked the results of last night's search. He had run a check on the records computer to find what cases the DA had personally approved plea bargains for. Looking at the list, he realized that this wasn't going to be easy. Sending it to the printer, he grabbed his hat and stood up. This was going to take time and research to figure out and the sooner he started the sooner he'd be done.

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She went by the name of Tigger. It had been so long since she had told anyone her real name that she had all but forgotten it. Now she existed only as alternate identities and rumors. There were a select few who knew how to contact her, and you could count them on her left paw. Today someone new had contacted her and to make it even more interesting, they used a mob contact method, but weren't directly associated.

Taking out a gym bag, she loaded it with stuff she'd need for the meet and to insure that if it's a trap, she'll be able to get away.

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As Sheila pulled into the parking lot, I could see she was holding onto the steering wheel with white-knuckle intensity. After sitting there for a few seconds, I reached over and turned off the engine, taking the keys with me. Opening the glove compartment, I removed the case with the ladies gun and the revolver. Climbing out, I went around to the driver's side and opened the door.

Waiting for Sheila to get out, I could hear the thumping of gunfire coming from within the range. Realizing that I wasn't going to give up, Sheila finally let go of the steering wheel and got out. As I closed the door she turned to me with a pleading look, "Do we have to do this?" Taking her hand, I gave it a squeeze, "No we don't. We can go back to the shop if you want, but it would make me feel a lot better if you would at least learn the basics." Flinching as a particularly loud weapon was fired, she pleaded, "But I'm so afraid of guns."

Putting my free arm around her, I pulled her in close, "Have you ever jumped out of an airplane?" Giving me a confused look as I changed the subject, she shook her head. "Jumping out of one is scary as hell, but once you make that first jump, the rest are a blast. Firing a gun is the same way, it can be scary at first, but once you realize that you're not going to shoot yourself in the foot, it can be fun."

We stood there for a short while before I decided, "It's ok. Let's head back." Letting go to open the door again, Sheila stopped me, "No! I'll do it." Lifting her chin up so I could look into her eyes, "Are you sure? I don't want to force you." Giving a little nod against my hand, she turned and walked towards the front door. Quickly catching up, I put my arm around her again, and escorted her in.

After showing the guy at the front desk the card that James had given me, he issued us two visitors' badges and buzzed us through the door. Walking back into the main area, we saw a large room filled wall to wall with display cabinets and accessories. Proceeding to the main desk, I checked out some ammunition, targets and ear protection for us. Looking



at the ear protection I noticed that it resembled a very old style, leather football helmet that would be strapped on.

Picking everything up, I escorted Sheila into the viewing area. This was a small set of stadium seating that gave a good view of the range and targets. As we walked through the first set of sound proofed barriers, the sound of the weapons fire increased. Each time a weapon was fired, Sheila would visibly flinch. Spotting a guy who looked to be a good example, we moved down the chairs until we got a good clear view of him. As we watched, I explained everything he was doing. After doing this for a while, Sheila relaxed a little and began asking questions.

Once she had stopped flinching each time the guy fired, I suggested that we go out onto the range. Being much more relaxed than she had been when we first came in, Sheila agreed with just a little hesitation.

After strapping on our ear protection, we proceeded past the second soundproof door. Moving down the range away from most of the other people, I found an alley that was unused. Setting down the weapons and ammo, I put one of the targets up on the run line and sent it out to about twenty feet. Unzipping the case, I took out the ladies gun and clips, placing them on the bench. Everything else I sat on a chair behind us.

Showing Sheila how to check a gun to make sure it wasn't loaded, how the safety worked and how to clear a jam, I went over the basic safety rules for firing a gun. Looking a little more nervous now that she was on the range, all I got as a response was usually a quick, nervous nod.

Placing the pistol back on the bench, I told her to load it. As she picked up the pistol, she held it like it would turn into a snake and bite her. After a couple of false starts, she got the clip in the right way and chambered a round. At this point I just instructed her to point it down range and squeeze the trigger. Giving me a curious look, she asked, "Shouldn't I aim at something?" Smiling, I shook my head and answered back, "Just point it in the general direction. I want you to feel it fire. Let's not worry about hitting something."

Holding the weapon with both hands, she turned her face away while squinting. Quickly jerking the trigger, I saw the barrel pop up as the pistol fired. Still waiting for something to happen, Sheila finally realized that it wasn't going to do anything else. Looking back over at me she asked, "Is that all?" Laughing, I nodded, "This gun has very little recoil. You can barely hear it when it shoots under these muffs."

Looking down range, she asked, "Why do they make so much noise?" Removing a shell from the box, I held it up, "This is your ammunition." Holding up my pinky, I continued, "This is the size of the stuff they're firing." Her eyes got round for a second as that sunk in, then smiling she nodded.

Continuing the lesson, we proceeded to use up the entire box of ammunition. By the time we were done, she could reasonably hit the body of a target nine out of ten shots. Convinced that she would be more of a danger to her target than any bystanders, I declared the lesson over. Packing everything up, we went back out. As she paid the bill

she asked me, "Do you think we can come down here again some time?" Nodding, I thought about it, "This is a private club, we'd have to see about a membership, or get James to bring us. I have no objections though."

As we drove back to the shop, Sheila smiled at me, "Thank you for being patient with me." Relaxing back in the seat, I tried to get comfortable, "Don't worry about it." Shaking her head for emphasis, "No, really. You went way out of your way to make sure that I was comfortable with what was happening. It means a lot to me." Patting her hand, I smiled, "The fact that you were willing to go in, even while terrified made it all worth it."

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Daniel was in the back of his limousine going to the meeting with the independent specialist he had contracted. She had set the meeting well outside of town and he was anxious to get there. Preplanning the meeting in his head, he was disturbed by the ringing of his cell phone. Flipping it open, he answered, "This is Khansman"

A female voice came across the phone from the other end. It was his contact. "Meeting's been moved. Take the next exit."

Moved? What the hell! He had his men watching the building incase she tried anything, "That's unacceptable."

The voice never changed pitch, "I don't care. You want my services then take the next exit and turn right. You've got two miles to make up your mind."

Hearing the phone disconnect, Khansman closed his with a snap. The bitch was changing the meeting. There was absolutely no way that he could get any backup there in time. Lowering the privacy glass he directed the driver to exit then turn right.

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Watching from her vantage point on top of the building, Tigger continued to call Daniel and give him directions to the building, all going via a circuitous route. As the car finally pulled into the building, she checked the approaches for any other vehicles. The building had been abandoned for years; nobody ever came out there. Flipping a switch, she armed the claymores that guarded the approach roads. Looking at the monitor, she could see his limousine, the driver opening the door for him. As Daniel got out, the driver re-entered the car and closed the door.

As she watched, she saw the DA looking around inside the abandoned loading area, trying to spot someone. Flipping on her headset, she picked up the video receiver and headed for the stairs. Clicking on the microphone she talked, "Welcome Mr. District Attorney." Beginning her decent, she watched as he looked around for the voice, "Don't bother looking for me, I'm not in the room for the moment." Seeing the scowl on his face, she could tell he wasn't used to this kind of treatment. That was good; it would keep him off balance.

"If you will look to the far end of the building, you will see an office door, please proceed in there and we will conduct our business in private." Watching as he spotted the door, she waited until he moved out of sight before switching to the second camera. Now

down to the third floor, she continued to proceed down the stairway while observing her potential employer, or prey.

As he reached the doorway, Khansman delayed going in. The room had very little light. Smiling at his discomfort, she let him stand there for a few seconds before toggling on a light in the room. Once again she spoke into the microphone, "Have a seat Mr. District Attorney." Watching him stand there, she switched to the third camera. It was sitting behind the desk, looking at the door. She could see him thinking about it. Looking at the camera, he asked, "Where are you? I don't talk to cameras." Chuckling, she quietly opened the door to the first floor and exited the stairwell. Closing the door quietly, she stalked along the corridor. Again, she instructed him, "Sit down, or get in your car and drive away. You have thirty seconds to decide. After that, I assume that you're not serious and we end it."

Reaching the door behind the office, she watched him snarl. He was really pissed, excellent. She didn't like surprises. He was now paying the price. Making his decision, she saw him move over to the chair and sit down, setting the briefcase on the floor next to him. Flipping the last green switch on her pad, she watched as the floodlight next to the back door kicked on, blinding Khansman. Opening the door, she quickly stepped through, leaving it ajar for a quick escape if needed.

Stepping in front of the light, she allowed it to silhouette her, preventing him from seeing her face or fur pattern. Even if he could see her clearly, the black body stocking she wore would hide her identity most efficiently.

Growling, Khansman demanded, "Just who the hell do you think you are." Giving a small laugh she answered him with joy, "I'm the person standing across the desk, holding the detonator to the claymore mine strapped under your chair, Mr. District Attorney." Hearing this, Daniel's eyes flew open. Before he could move she warned him, "Any attempt to get out of the chair before I say you can, will result in your being turned into dog chow."

He was really pissed now; she could smell it in the air. His anger combined with fear was intoxicating. Getting a handle on her emotions, she got down to business, "You're still alive for one reason. Someone I trust referred you. You should thank whatever god you believe in that you are still alive." Watching as this sunk in, she continued, "What is it you want me to do."

Taking his briefcase, he began to swing it up to the desktop, and then reconsidered it. Placing it on his lap, he opened it up. Removing a large manila envelope, he opened it and removed the contents. Placing the two pictures on the table, he tossed the envelope up besides them, "These are your targets. I want the tiger eliminated first, then the bear as soon as possible."

Examining the pictures, Tigger recognized the bear. His face had been plastered all over the news recently. The other was a mystery. "Who's the tiger." Trying to regain control of the situation, Khansman leaned back and attempted to look nonchalant, "He's a detective with the police department. He's getting too close to something on an investigation."

Nodding, she pointed to the other picture, "What's the deal with the bear? Does he know something?" Staring at her for a second, he finally answered, "He's just an obstacle that I want eliminated."

Nodding, she picked up the pictures and placed them back in the envelope. "One hundred and fifty thousand, seventy-five in advance and seventy-five on completion." Outraged, he leaned forward until he saw her hold the detonator out to the side, remembering the mine. Sitting back he growled again, "What do you think I am, made of gold? I can't afford that!"

Backing towards the door, she tossed a business card on the table, "The price is non negotiable. That's the number for the account. If I don't see the money in there by noon tomorrow, I will assume that you don't want the work done." As she stood in the doorway, Khansman held up a hand to his eyes to try to shield himself from the light. "Don't move from that seat, or try to make a phone call until you hear me say you can move. Any attempt to do so will result in your termination."

Stepping out the door, she closed it behind her. Putting the large magic marker, which Daniel had mistaken for a detonator, back in her belly pouch, she strode quickly for the back door. Checking her display to see if any of her alarms had tripped, she quickly darted out the back door and into a ditch. Moving along the ditch to a drainage tunnel, she came to the manual control box for the building. For the last time, she spoke into the microphone, "You may leave now. You have two minutes to get clear of the building. I suggest you beat feet Mr. District Attorney." Turning off the spotlight, she also deactivated the claymores along the road.

Watching on the monitor, she saw him running from the office towards the car. Getting in, she saw the driver spinning the rear wheels trying to get out of the building. When they were clear of the building, she detonated the explosives she had placed in the building, destroying any evidence of their visit. Listening to the rumble of the collapsing building, she heard the satisfying 'whoosh' as the pyrotechnic jelly she had placed ensured that there would be no physical trace of her spoor. Unplugging the box from the cable, she placed it inside a backpack sitting on the ground. Donning the pack, she quickly headed down along the drainage ditch and down the side of a hill to the waiting motorcycle she had hidden there.

Quickly stripping off the body smock, she put everything in the trunk of the motorcycle. Putting on a full-face helmet, she started the bike and rode away in the opposite direction of the exits from the abandoned building. The guy was just the kind of prick she had expected him to be.

Considering the fact that he might not pay, she decided that rather risking him causing trouble for her, she would make sure that he'd never bother anyone again. Laughing at the thought, she couldn't believe the idiot had been stupid enough to handle the pictures. That and the videotape of the interview would make for useful blackmail if he ever decided to get uppity.

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## Chapter 28

Returning to his desk after lunch, Michael sat down to find a folder sitting on it. Looking at it, he saw it was on the Raccoon that he had talked to the other day. Opening it, he found an incident report. They had found his left hand hanging from a telephone pole. Cursing himself, Michael understood immediately what had happened.

Closing the folder, Michael could feel the blood begin to pump. The hunt was on and one-way or another, one of them was going to go down hard.

# Chapter 29

Keep your friends close, but your enemies closer.

*Howdy folks, Logan Furbody here for Columbus's Independent News Network. Today we've got a ton of good stuff to cover not only on the political front but from local news also. Today's 'Stupid Quote of the Day' is from Al Bore: 'What do you mean I didn't single handedly invent the internet?' In response George Brush replied: "What a maroon." There you have it folks, our choices for the next presidency.*

*On a more local front we've been informed that some unfriendly native has decided to give the police a hand, literally. (Cut to scene of cop in a cherry picker basket being lifted up to a light poll.) Someone hung a raccoon's paw from this light post near the police station. Rumors abound as to the origin. However, one source reports that it was from a gang member arrested the other day in the shooting of Mr. Stay Puff. The youth was released after it was determined that the search warrant was invalid. Ballistics show that it **was** the weapon used in the drive by shooting which now virtually eliminates any chance of prosecuting anyone for the crime. One must wonder if this is because the little wanabee hit man was stupid enough to get busted with the weapon, or is there some other, more sinister reason for his losing a limb. Time will only tell.*

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Returning to the studio after our visit to the gun range, I gave Sheila a quick kiss before heading off towards editing. Passing by Zig Zag's office, I heard her holler out, "Arden, would you come in here for a second?" Sometimes it's hard to sneak past the boss when you're seven feet tall and white.

Walking into the office, I sat down on the couch near the desk. She had a nice office, but unfortunately the chairs were a bit wimpy for one of my stature. Turning her chair, she crossed her legs and got a serious look. "I know you're new here, and I've been cutting you and Sheila some slack, but I just wanted to ask you to make sure you let someone know if you're going to take a long lunch so we don't worry about you." Nodding, I could understand it, "I'm sorry Zig Zag. I stuck my head in here to warn you we were going to the range after lunch, but you were gone. I'll make it a point to let the receptionist know." Getting a curious look on her face, she asked, "Range?"

Uh oh. Why did she sound surprised? "The gun range?" I could see her brow furrow, "Why were you going to a gun range?" If she didn't maul James, I think I just might have to. Shifting uncomfortably, I tried to think how to explain. "I'm not sure how to explain this Zig Zag." Without moving, she blinked once and replied, "How about being direct and to the point." Sighing, I prepared for another hospital stay, "Last night, James talked to me after we got out of the Jacuzzi. He wanted to make sure I knew how to use a pistol." Waving her hand slightly for me to continue. "Once he knew I knew how to handle a gun, he gave me three pistols for us to hang onto in case anything happens."

Uncrossing her legs, she leaned forwards. She looked pissed. Unconsciously I leaned away from her as she growled, "He did what!" Holding up my hands, I spoke rapidly, "Take it easy Zig Zag..." Bearing her fangs, "Don't tell me to take it easy. You people bring guns into my house and workplace without even telling me?" Time to play Gandhi. Crossing my hands on my lap, I just gave her as neutral a response as possible. Glaring at

me, she asked, "Well?" Shaking my head, I replied quietly, "Not until you calm down. I have no intention of visiting the hospital any time soon."

Sitting back in the chair, she closed her eyes and taking a deep breath, I saw her count quietly to ten. Opening her eyes, I could see that she was a little better in control than before. "I'm sorry Zig Zag, but I assumed that James had told you." Holding my hand up as she started to speak, "No, let me finish. James did what he did to protect you and me. I don't know why he didn't tell you yet, but I'm not going to say I don't agree with him about having them. If something happens again, I want to know that Sheila can protect herself, that's why he gave her one AND why I spent time after lunch teaching her how to shoot."

As I watched, I saw some of the anger leaving her as she remembered what we had been through the last few days. Continuing on, I hopped I'd be able to save James some fur loss, "I have a feeling that James probably brought up the subject with you and you reacted negatively, right?" Nodding her head slightly, "Yes he did. I guess I wasn't very open about it." Nodding, I leaned forward, "Don't you see. James is just trying to protect us anyway he can. Yes, maybe it was wrong for him not to tell you, but I can't say I would have acted any differently."

Turning back to her desk, she picked up her coffee and took a sip, "All right, I guess I'll let you live for now, but just tell me where they are." Counting them off on my fingers, "There's a 9mm in our bedroom under my pillow, Sheila's carrying a .25 ladies gun in her purse, and there's a .38 special in the glove compartment of the Mercedes." As I headed for the door, she asked, "Is that all the pistols?" DOH! Couldn't duck it. Turning back, "James also had a revolver, but I don't know where he put it." Nodding, she waved me away, "OK. Get going over to editing, Tony said he got a bunch of trade rags from the book store while out at lunch for you guys to go over."

Heading to video I tried to determine if she was going to rip James a new one or not. I finally decided not, but I do think she would rake him over the coals a bit before letting him off the hook.

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After Arden headed back to Editing, Sheila slipped into Sabrina's cubbyhole and closed the door. Turning towards her, Sabrina smiled recognizing Sheila, "Hey Sheila, twice in one week?" Nodding, Sheila sat down on the corner of the desk. Opening up her purse, she reached in and took out some photocopies. "Sabrina, can I get you to do a favor for me?" Giving Sheila a conspiratorial look, Sabrina snickered, "Are you kidding, I've been playing Dig Dug while I'm waiting on the proofs to come back from the printers." Nodding, Sheila asked, "I need this to be between just us chickens, ok?" Hearing the seriousness in Sheila's voice, Sabrina sat back a little, "Sure, as long as it's not illegal or anything." Giving a small laugh, Sheila handed her the photocopies, "It's not illegal, just very private."

Opening up the papers, Sabrina saw that they were of a drawing depicting a coin or medallion. The first page had a picture of a horrible face in the middle, with strange script around the outside. The second one had more strange script spiraling from the outside to

the inside. It looked like a hodgepodge of symbols, some Egyptian others unrecognizable. Looking back up at Sheila, she asked, "What do you want me to do with this?" Leaning down quietly so as not to have to whisper, "I need you to find out anything you can about it." Looking up at Sheila, Sabrina gave her an odd look, "What do I look like, a reference library?" Defensively, Sheila sat up, "Hey, you went to a University. You took classes on images and symbols and stuff."

Shaking her head, Sabrina folded up the photocopies, "OK. I'll dig around on the Internet and see what I can find out, ok?" Being better than nothing, Sheila thanked her and headed back to work. If they were lucky, maybe they would be able to find out some way to help Arden's doctor.

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Sitting at his desk, Daniel Khansman fumed. Nobody treated him like that and got away with it. And what did she think she was doing demanding ten million dollars for two simple hits! That was absurd. Even if he had wanted to pay it, there was no way he could pay right now; he was tapped out after the election. The money would come flowing in soon, but as of yet he was still behind the eight ball.

There was one good thing so far today though. Mike had been most imaginative with its disposal of the Raccoon. Like he said, the stool pigeon would be headlines for as long as it took him to run out of body parts.

Licking his chops at the thought, Daniel decided that it was time for lunch, and he was in the mood for steak, tartar.

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Having just gotten back from a worksite, James sat down on his desk and began sorting through messages. While he was doing so, Doug came in carrying a note and looking quite confused. Sitting down, he addressed James; "I just got the weirdest message for you from Zig Zag." Reaching across the desk, James took the note and read it.

Walls fixed, will be painted tomorrow.  
Carpet will be down tomorrow.  
New bed will be in Friday.  
Should I leave room in garage for a Howitzer?  
Zig Zag

Trying to figure out what she was talking about on the last line, it suddenly occurred to James that Zig Zag must have found out about the pistols that he had given Arden. Silently cursing himself, he leaned back in his chair and stared at the roof.

Seeing the look on his friend's face, Doug leaned forward and asked, "Hey, what's up? What was that all about?" Closing his eyes, he gave a sigh of exasperation, "I loaned Arden a couple of pistols. I wanted him to be able to defend himself and Sheila if something happened again." Nodding, Doug asked, "And I take it she's not exactly ecstatic with the idea?" Giving his friend a very pained look, James confessed, "I didn't exactly tell her I was doing it." Shaking his head at what he was hearing, "I'm sorry James, did I hear you say you didn't exactly tell her? Then just what did you exactly do?" Shaking his head, he shrugged, "I started to talk to her about it, but she practically went



berserk on the subject. I was going to try to bring it up over lunch, but I got tied up with a client."

Leaning back in his chair, Doug tried to think of a way out of the situation for his friend. "I'm sorry James, but I think you've dug yourself into a pretty deep hole. The only redeeming feature I can see is that she didn't sign it 'and don't come back'. That means you have some chance at redemption." Nodding, James picked up the phone as Doug stood to leave. It was time to call and beg forgiveness.

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It had been a long day, and my arms hurt again. When I had last glanced at the clock, it was almost four. Sitting on top of the table, I sat tailor style, meditating on trying to relax and revitalize my arms. After an indeterminate amount of time, I heard someone clearing her throat. Opening my eyes, I looked around and spotted Sabrina in the doorway. Giving me a conspiratorial look, she asked, "Does Zig Zag know you're sitting around, sleeping on her time?" Smiling at this I asked what I could do for her.

Rubbing her neck, she explained, "I've been working on the computer all day. I guess I forgot to take enough breaks and wound up with a stiff neck. Leon swears that you're good at this stuff. Mind helping me?" Nodding, I slid off the table, "Sure, just climb on up and have a seat."

Climbing up on the table, She squirmed back until her knees were right up against the side. As I walked around behind her, she shot me a worried look, "I don't have to take my shirt off, right?" Chuckling as I started working the kinks out of her shoulders I explained, "Nope. Not unless you want a full massage. Then the only reason that helps is it's easier to get through the fur if I use some oils. It also helps to avoid pulling on the fur. For something like this you don't really need it."

Felling the tension across the top of her shoulders I asked, "You look down on that new monitor don't you?" Nodding, "Um hum. A little." Remembering how that bothered me, "Can I suggest you take some books and put them under the monitor so the middle is even with your eyes?" Rocking her head back and forth slowly to help stretch out the muscles, "I guess I knew that, I just forgot. I'll get a couple of the old HTML manuals I have and stuff them under it."

After about five minutes of this she had loosened up to the point where her neck no longer hurt, "Thank you very much." Accepting the thanks, "No sweat. If you ever feel like a full body work over, just let me know." Laughing, she gave me an incredulous look, "There's about as much chance of me getting naked on this table as there is you going out in front of the camera." Nodding, I laughed back, "Only way that will happen is if you're out there in front of me." Sabrina got a totally indignant look on her face, "Not in your life time!" Nodding, I bowed with a flourish, "My point exactly." Giving her a wink and a smile, I started cleaning up to go home.

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As we lay in bed, I couldn't help but think about what Nanuk had said to me the other night about the possibility of going home. I guess it showed on my face because Sheila shook me and asked quietly, "Hey, what's the problem?" Glancing down at her, I

snuggled a little closer, "Nothing to worry about, just doing some thinking." Turning over, she laid her head on my shoulder, hands folded underneath, "Want to talk about it?"

"I..." How could I say it without hurting her, "I'm not sure how to say it." Stroking my head with her left hand, she lifted her head up so she could see my eyes clearly, "Hey, you can tell me. I'm a big girl." I closed my eyes, trying to lose myself in the feeling of her closeness, but it wouldn't work. Unable to avoid it, I decided to tell her, "I had another dream, with Nanuk, in the spirit realm." She stopped stroking my fur and propped herself up fuller, "What did she tell you." I avoided looking at her, "That very soon, I would have to decide if I wanted to go back." Seeing the look on her face ripped my heart apart, "Sheila, I had pretty much assumed that I'd never have a chance to go back. Besides, I'm happy here with you. It wasn't really something I was thinking about."

Sitting up, she crossed her legs and looked down on me. I could see the pain in her eyes at what I was saying. "Then why even think of going back?" Trying to control the pain I was feeling, I tried to make her understand, "I left my entire life behind when I came here. Not just my job, or my friends, but my family. We were close. I have two brothers and a mother who all think that something horrible must have happened to me. I'll never be able to see them again, to properly say goodbye." Reaching up, I placed my hand on her arm, "You can understand my feelings. I want to stay, but a part of me is aching for home. Now knowing that there may be a way back... It's ripping me apart."

Trying to look at her face, I realized that I couldn't see her well through the tears. Her head down, she spoke quietly, "I can understand that. I wouldn't want that to happen to anyone." Sitting up, I leaned towards her; "I don't ever want to leave you, not when life was just getting fun." Giving me a hard look she slid off the bed, looking down at me she said, "Fun? Is that all I am to you?"

As I started to get out of the bed, she went in the bathroom and closed the door. Walking around to it, leaned against the door, and listened. I could hear her crying, "Sheila. That's not what I meant. Since I've been with you, I've started living again for the first time in a *long* time. Don't you understand? My feelings for you are what's tearing me apart." Not hearing a response, leaned against the doorjamb, "If it were a matter of you just being a romp in the daisies, then I wouldn't even hesitate at leaving. But you're not."

Sliding down to the bottom of the wall, I sat down, hard. Raising my voice a little, I turned to the door, "Damn it Sheila, don't you realize that I love you! I don't want to leave." Taking a deep breath, I said quietly, "Please don't drive me away now." Why do I always have to open my big muzzle? I need to learn to just be quiet and uncommunicative, like a good male should.

# Chapter 30

Terminal Frost

I'm not sure how long I had been sitting there when I heard the bathroom door open. The executioner had come. Pulling my legs in so she could get by, I waited. After a short time, she stepped over my feet and walked to the bed. I just sat there, head down. After a few minutes, I heard her lay down, then turn off the light.

Waiting, I listened to her breathing as she eventually drifted off to sleep. Crossing my arms over my knees, I leaned forward and lay my head down on them. It was somewhat hard to breathe like this. Trying to get to sleep, a part of me hoped I wouldn't have to wake up.

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Hearing the crackle of a fire, Sheila opened her eyes in a panic. Looking around, she saw that she lay on simple bedding near a fire pit, the smoke trickling out through the roof. Sitting up, she looked around and saw that she was at the hut that Arden had described as belonging to Nanuk. A noise from the side caught her attention as a large polar bear entered. It wasn't like Arden, but a primitive, un-evolved version of the species. Even on all fours, it towered above her sitting form and struck fear into her heart. As she sat rock still, the bear sniffed at Sheila then turned and walked to the other side of the fire. Squatting down on its haunches it reared up changing shape into that which she had become accustomed to seeing with Arden. For some time, it, no she, looked at Sheila and then shook her head, "Why do you throw away that which you desire so much?"

Surprised at hearing her speak, Sheila tried to think how to respond, "I'm not sure what you're talking about." The eyes closed to slits, "Don't toy with Nanuk. Nanuk can see within your soul here. Much effort was required to bring you here, and in this domain I am absolute." Icy fingers of fear grabbed at Sheila's heart as she realized that this truly was a force of nature, a power to be reckoned with. Not sensing any real hostility, Sheila took the feeling for what it was, a warning, "I'm sorry Nanuk. This is all so.... new to me."

Relaxing a little, Nanuk nodded, "Understandable. Even for Arden, this realm is unfamiliar. But that is not why I brought you here. I am here to show you your mistake." Resenting the interference, Sheila gave Nanuk a hard look, "And by what right do you stick your muzzle into my business. Haunt Arden if you must, but I'm not one of yours."

Slowly shaking her head, Nanuk let out a sigh, "You do not understand. This is not just his life, but also yours. I ask again, why do you drive away that which you have sought for so long?" Still defensive, Sheila waved her hand, "Because I'm not a toy. I'm not just here to give him a good time, and then be discarded when he feels the call to go home. I've had that happen too many times, I won't let someone do it to me again."

Standing Nanuk stepped around the fire and squatted next to Sheila, "And if it costs his life, you will still blame him?" Surprised at what she heard, the shock penetrated her anger, "What are you talking about, he's not in any danger of dying because of me." Grabbing her arm, Nanuk hauled her to her feet.

Catching her balance, she realized that they were standing by the doorway to the bedroom. She could see herself in the bed, strangely illuminated by an orange yellow aura. Looking to Arden, she could see him sitting by the bathroom door. He hadn't moved since she went to bed. She could see his head lay on his arms, which were crossed on his knees. He too was illuminated, though by a faint, bluish white aura. Nanuk pointed to the form on the floor, and forced Sheila over towards him, "Look at him. Sitting like that he cannot breathe. He does this on purpose."

Speechless, Sheila looked on his form, noticing that the aura was slowly fading. "He told you once he didn't want to live without you, and that he would give his life rather than hurt you. He does not see a way out of this, child! Thus he removes himself from your life." Understanding how her past pains had forced her to create this breach, Sheila saw that she had misinterpreted what he had said. It had been her automatic reaction, which had caused her to misjudge the situation. Looking up at Nanuk she asked, "What can I do?"

Grasping Sheila painfully by the scruff of her neck, Nanuk held Sheila so that she was eye to eye, "You must save him." As she was thrown across the room, she awoke with a start. Looking over to the bedroom door, she saw nothing. Turning to the bathroom door, she saw Arden sitting on the floor.

Untangling herself from the bedding, she fell out of the bed in her rush to get to him. Taking his head in her paws, she lifted it up, 'My god, he's not breathing!' Grabbing the fur on his shoulders, Sheila pulled with all her strength, knocking him over and stretching him out. Holding his muzzle shut, she began breathing for him. After the second breath, he began to cough. Gasping for breath, he opened his eyes and seeing Sheila's outline, covered his face with his hands. With a pained voice he asked, "Why didn't you just let me go?"

Pulling his hands away Sheila bent down and kissed him, "I'm sorry. I was wrong. I just automatically went on the defensive. Everything I said was wrong. Please, swear you won't leave me." A pleading look on his face, Arden sat up, then reached out and put his hand on her cheek, "How many times must I promise this? From the first time I saw you in the hospital I've told you this. What does it take for you to believe me?" Rocking back on her knees, Sheila dropped her head, her hands buried in her lap, "I know that. I was wrong. Can you ever forgive me?"

Leaning forward he lifted her head with his hand. Placing his muzzle next to hers he rubbed them together, "There is nothing to forgive. Just promise that you won't push me away again."

Taking his hand, Sheila stood and led him to the bed, determined never to make the same mistake she had made tonight.

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Sitting by the window, Michael watched as the rodent gang leader Mike approached. He had taken the precaution of knocking out the streetlight that normally shone in the window. Watching as the drunken rat walked up to the building, he moved to a position inside the kitchen. After checking the pistol and its silencer, he then donned the mask he

had brought. Waiting in the kitchen, he listened to the creak of the stairs as his prey approached. His senses became totally alive as he entered a hunting mode. Smelling the scent of the rat as it unlocked the door, he prepared to strike.

Opening the door, the rodent flipped on the light switch. Cursing at the cheap lamp, he walked over to turn on the kitchen light. Just as he stepped around the corner, Michael struck the rodent on the side of the head with his pistol. Stunned from the blow, he dropped to his knees. Once again striking with the pistol, Michael rendered the gangbanger unconscious.

Closing the door to the hallway, Michael locked it. Locating the plug for the lamp, he re-inserted it into the wall, causing the light to come on. Quickly walking to the window, he closed the shades, ensuring nobody would see what was going on inside. As he walked back towards the kitchen, Michael turned on the stereo, which began immediately to boom out a loud, obnoxious rap song about cop killers. Reminded that he was dealing with scum, Michael grabbed the rodent by the belt and hauled him over to a wooden armchair by the wall. Placing the chair in the middle of the room, he dumped the rodent in it. Taking the roll of ductape he had, Michael systematically taped the rat's arms and legs to the chair. Smiling with a malicious thought, he also placed a strip over it's eyes. Pulling this stuff off would be very painful.

Going into the kitchen, he took the pan of water out of the freezer that he had prepared for this moment. Taking it back into the living room, he splashed into the rodent's face. Sputtering, Mike began struggling with his bonds. Realizing something is wrong, he began to curse, "What the fuck is going on here! Why the fuck am I tied up?" Smacking the rodent on the soft spot of his skull where he had smacked him before with the gun. "Ow! Mother fucker! I'm gonna kill you when I get outta here!"

Grabbing his ear in one paw, Michael sank his claws into it, getting a satisfying screech of pain. Leaning close, he whispered in a husky voice, "I am here because you failed us. You know how the boss gets when you fuck up, and you fucked up big this time!" Confused by what he was hearing, he swung his head around vainly searching for the voice, "What the hell are you talking about, I did exactly what he fuckin' wanted!" Smacking him again, he growled in the other ear, "And just what the FUCK do you think he wanted you to do?" Twisting his head again, he rapidly spoke, "He said to make an example of the raccoon so that nobody would ever fuckin' betray the DA again!"

Bingo! Confirmation that the DA was responsible from a second source. Now to finish it, "You listen up you little *shit*. I was told to give you an option. Personally, I'd prefer to cap your ass right here, right now, but that's not what he wants. He's going to give you three hours to get out of town. You ever show your face in his territory and he's going to use you for a fuckin' scratchin' post, you got that cat meat?" Michael smelled urine, "What the fuck! I did just what he fuckin' said man! Why is he doing this to me!"

Laughing, Michael let him stew for a few minutes, "Since you're such a fucking loser that you can't figure it out yourself, I'll spell it out dick head. He said make him an example, but you made him a fuckin' martyr for the fuckin' cops. Instead of making a statement, you've got the entire god damned police force looking for YOUR ass! Now

they find your ass, there's a chance you will spill the beans, so it's time to get rid of you. Either you leave, or you get buried. I'm hoping for the second option, but it's not my choice is it."

Cutting his left arm free, Michael backed up and turned off the light, "Your three hours start right now. Don't dally as I'll be watching." Stepping out the door, Michael quietly closed it. Heading quickly down the stairs, he left by the back door and jogged away from the building. Making sure that he wasn't being watched, Michael removed his mask and continued walking to where he had parked his car. Getting in, he casually drove to a location where he could watch the ganger's car. After about forty minutes, he saw his target come out of the door with a gym bag and run for his car

A few seconds after the rat climbed into the car, Michael watched as the vehicle was engulfed in a ball of fire, parts flying everywhere. 'Damn! Looked like Khansman had taken steps to try to prevent Mike from spilling his guts.' Fortunately Michael had gotten to him first. Starting his car, he backed out of the alley so none of the on-lookers would spot him.

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Tigger listened to the recording from Khansman's home phone line. He had been rather upset with the response that the Police had taken towards the raccoon's demise and had made the fatal mistake of talking to certain parties about eliminating the problem. He had also been stupid enough to complain to her mob contact about the price.

Daniel Khansman had just signed his own death warrant. The fun part would be making it look like a suicide, but first she needed to figure out a way to get in good with the detective without him suspecting anything. He was a vital component to her plan. Smiling, she popped the tape out of the recorder. It would come in handy later on.

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As I lay in the bed, I felt the whisper of Sheila's breath, as she slept curled up next to me. I was unable to doze off myself. I had tried meditating in order to reach Nanuk's realm, but had been unable to cross over. It was as if I lacked the strength somehow to press beyond the barrier. Giving up on sleep, I carefully got out of bed, being sure not to disturb Sheila and headed for the kitchen. Maybe some warm milk would help me relax.

Walking into the kitchen, I got down a large coffee cup and poured some milk into it. After nuking it for a few seconds, I picked up the cup and headed for the back door. As I was about to deactivate the security system, I saw that it was already off. Curious, I looked out back and spotted Zig Zag sitting in a chair by the pool. Opening the door, I slipped out and quietly closed it behind me. Proceeding down the deck stairs, I stalked up behind her. As I stood there, watching her, I could see that she was looking at the stars, her mind a million miles away. Taking a loud slip, I announced my presence.

Giving a gasp, she whipped her head around. Moving so she could see me better, I stood by her, "Couldn't sleep either?" Holding her chest with her hand, she was shaking from the shock, "Damn it Arden, are you trying to give me a heart-attack?" I gave her a small apologetic smile, "Sorry, that wasn't my intent." Rubbing my chin a thought occurred to me, "However, I can't say I'd be too adverse to giving you CPR if it ever came down to

it." Shaking her head, she just growled a little, "Why don't you go abuse Sheila or something."

Pulling up a chair, I sat down next to her, "Sheila's asleep. You're awake. Which brings us to the reason I came out here." Looking at me for a second, she just shook her head and turned back to the stars. Sighing, I leaned back in my chair, and took another sip. "Would you like some? I'd be glad to warm some up for you." Distracted, she shook her head, "No, thank you though."

Quietly sipping my milk, I leaned back in the chair. Looking up, I could spot the major stars, "Polaris, Cepheus, Cygnus, Lyra, Ursa Minor..." I heard Zig Zag ask, "Ursa Minor?" I hadn't realized that I was talking out loud, "You see Polaris? That large, bright star up to the north?" Pointing the general direction, I saw Zig Zag nod, "Ok, above that, due south is the little dipper. The second star is Ursa Minor" I could hear her chuckle, "Leave it to you to know where the bear stars are." Shrugging, I agreed, "Sorry, but there's no skunk star as far as I know. But there is a Canus Major." Hearing this she grumbled a little bit.

Putting the pieces together, I nodded, "Still pissed at James?" Shooting me a hard glance, she turned away again, "Why don't you worry about yourself." Setting the coffee cup on the ground, I crossed my legs, "I do worry about myself. I worry about Sheila, James, Sabrina, and everyone else at ZZ Studios. Ever since the drive by, I worry about everyone. Most importantly, right now though, I'm worried about you. What happened today was partially my fault. If you want to be pissed at someone, then be pissed at me."

I saw her shake her head, "You don't understand... You don't understand at all...." Leaning forward, I put a hand on her shoulder. As she turned to look at me, I gave a gentle squeeze, "Then make me understand." Releasing her shoulder, I picked up the chair and moved it around so I sat in front of her. Sitting back I waited for her to talk.

Slowly and quietly she explained, "After you and I talked this afternoon, I called and left a message for James. I let him know that Sheila's apartment would be ready in a couple of days. At the end, I asked if he wanted me to leave room in the garage for the Howitzer." Taking a few deep breaths, she continued her story, "Anyway, later that afternoon he called back to explain what happened. I don't know how it happened, but we went from talking to arguing, then yelling. Last thing I remember, I told him not to talk to me again until he had learned a little respect." Shrugging her arms, she tried to get a hand on what had happened, "I've been sitting here trying to figure out why I went off on him like that." Thinking for a moment, I asked, "You don't like pistols. That's what started all this right?"

Hugging herself, she leaned forwards a little, "Yah, I don't like pistols." Seeing she wasn't going to continue, I asked, "Why? What is it that you hate so much about pistols." Quietly, she quickly answered in a monotone voice, "I don't know." She had answered too quickly, there was no thought behind it. Leaning forward, I lowered my face to her level, "Are you sure? You answered that pretty quick." Looking up at me, I saw the same look she gave me in the hospital when she talked about the accident. I pleaded, "Please, tell me what happened Zig Zag."

Standing up, she walked a little ways, until she was standing by the pool. Following her quietly, I watched as she looked down into the water and watched the reflection of the moon as it gently rippled in the water. Standing next to her, I waited and watched. After a few minutes, I put my right hand on her shoulder. Still watching the moon, she spoke quietly, "It's because of my father." Remembering what I had read about her past, it became obvious, "He abused you, didn't he?" Stiffly, she nodded, "He used to beat me when I was young. I was always afraid that if I defended myself against him, he'd turn on my brother and sister." Nodding, I understood, "So you stayed, and took the abuse?" She gave another shudder as a breeze blew by, "As I grew up, the abuse continued..." I spoke quietly in her ear, "It changed. Not only did he beat you, but he molested you too."

Trying not to cry, she managed to choke out the words, "One day he hit me hard, I fell and hit my head on the table and split it open." I didn't understand. I knew all this from Maxx's write up, but where did a pistol come in? "And then what happened?" Still struggling for control, she answered, "My mother, she thought he'd killed me."

As she began to cry, I turned her so that she faced me. Pulling her close, I held her tight as she cried into the fur on my chest, "I never knew she had a gun. She was yelling at my father to get out, but he wouldn't leave. He kept daring her to shoot. Then he hit her, and knocked the gun away. He just stood there, hitting her over and over, again and again."

Clawing at my chest, she pushed herself away, fists at her side, she screamed, "He was going to kill her! I had no choice!" Sobbing, she dropped to her knees, "I had no choice, he would have killed her." Kneeling down in front of her, I took her head in my hands, and forced her to look at me, "It's hard, I know. But you did what you had to do. If you hadn't, he might have killed your mom, or your kid brother." Tearing herself away from my hands, she glared at me, "Don't patronize me! You don't know what it's like to shoot someone."

Sitting back on my feet, I just shook my head, "That's not true." Hearing this, she gave me a distrusting look. "About eight or nine years ago, I lived in an apartment complex. One of the people in the adjoining buildings was a real asshole. He was constantly drunk. The cops were out to his apartment two or three times a month. One day, after spending time at the gun range, I pulled up into the apartment complex. As I headed inside, I saw him chase his girlfriend out with a baseball bat. She tripped and fell." My mind numb, I remembered the scene as if from afar, "She tripped, and he was on her. Swinging the bat. I could see her trying to defend herself. The sound of her arm, as it shattered under the force of the blow. Without thinking, I opened the case and pulled out the pistol. I always keep loaded clips in the case, so it was just a matter of sliding the clip home, and releasing the slide lock. Holding the gun at my side, I walked towards him, yelling at him to stop. When he heard me he turned, he had spotted a new target for his rage. Charging at me, he raised the bat over his head. Lifting the pistol up, I aimed. As he saw the pistol, he froze. He was a good five or ten feet away. As we stood there, I saw her kid come running out to his mother. She was covered in blood. As her son shook her, she didn't move. He had to be stopped." Taking a deep breath, I swallowed, "It wasn't self defense, though that's what the cops called it. I executed him. One shot, right in the bridge of the nose. I had hit that mark on a target hundreds of times. But this time, it was for real."



## Chapter 30

Looking up at Zig Zag, I shook my head, "The only consolation I'll ever have is that he won't *ever* hurt *anyone* again!"

As I actually focused on Zig Zag's face, I saw her eyes were wide open, her hands over her muzzle. Standing up, I looked down on her. "You were defending someone you loved. Your mother, your kid brother and sister. I *executed* a man over a women I had never spoken to in my life." Turning, I walked back over to my chair. Picking up the coffee cup, I headed inside. Some times I wish I really did have amnesia.

# Chapter 31

A day of reckoning.

Trying to push the memory out of my mind, I washed the coffee cup and placed it in the drainer. Taking a paper towel, I had started to dry down the sink when I noticed blood. Looking down, I realized that when Zig Zag had been trying to push away, she had mauled me. The front of my chest was covered in ragged stripes of blood, trickling down my fur and dripping into the sink as I leaned over it. Backing up, I saw that there was blood on the side of the counter where I had leaned against it. Quickly wiping up the blood, I tossed the paper towel in the trash and headed back towards the hall bathroom.

Sliding the door closed behind me, I opened the medicine cabinet over the sink. Looking inside, I found hydrogen peroxide, iodine and some antibacterial salves. Taking a washrag, I soaked it and began cleaning up the fur. She had been in a frenzy to get away from me. I was hoping I wouldn't need stitches. Putting iodine on the wounds, I growled with each stroke of the dipper wand, that crap stung. Getting about half way through the dozen or so cuts, I heard a knock on the door.

It was Zig Zag, "Arden? Is that you in there?" Catching my breath, I spoke back to the door, "Yah Zig Zag." I could hear her hand on the latch, "Can I come in please?"

Aw man! I didn't want her to see me like this, "This really isn't a good time Zig Zag." Hearing her start to slide open the door, I grabbed the rag and the bottles, moving quickly to the end of the counter, I turned so that my back was to the door. As the door opened, I could hear the concern in her voice, "I'm sorry, but I just had to make sure you were all right." Nodding, I answered tersely, "I'll be fine. I just need some time to my self."

Putting her hand on my shoulder startled me, causing me to flinch away. "Please, I need to see your face. I need to see that you're going to be ok." Shaking my head, I turned slightly to make sure she could only see my back, "You don't want to see me like this right now Zig Zag. Please, do us both a favor, and just go to bed." Not to be deterred, she grabbed my arm and pulled. Pleading I begged her, "Please Zig Zag. Don't do this." Sensing her determination as she continued to pull, I allowed her to turn my body. Keeping my eyes closed, I heard her gasp as she saw my chest, "Oh my God! What happened? Did I do that to you?"

Opening my eyes, I looked at the anguish on her face, the expression mirrored on mine. Moving back over to the sink, I set the medicines back down, "Don't worry about it. I heal fast." Pulling me around again, she looked at the damage, "Oh god Arden, I'm sorry, I didn't realize, I forgot about my claws." Taking the cloth, she began cleaning the wounds I hadn't gotten to, "Some of these are pretty deep. We should go to the hospital, I think you'll need stitches." Putting my hand on her arm, I stopped her as she began to leave, "No. No hospitals. Just let me finish cleaning up."

Nodding, she had me sit down on the toilet so that she could work on my chest easier. After she had done three or four of the gouges, she asked in a quiet voice, "Outside, what you said, was that all for real?" She wasn't looking at my eyes. She was making a point of looking at the wounds. Trying to think how to answer, I just sat there, wincing as she spread on the iodine. Finally she looked up at me and asked again, "Please, I want to know the truth. It's important to me." Lifting my eyes up to meet hers, I nodded and

answered reluctantly, "Yes, it's true. I was judge, jury and executioner. That I and I alone, was responsible for his death can't be argued. If I had it to do again today, I wouldn't hesitate to do it again either. People like that aren't..." I was going to say 'human', but it wouldn't work, "They aren't fit to be in society. They're nothing better than a rabid animal that needs to be put down."

Hanging her head, she stopped working on the cuts for a second, "He didn't die you know. My father. I thought I had killed him, but it only grazed his head." I could smell the salt in her tears. "I had wanted to kill him. When I pulled the trigger, all I wanted was for him to die. But after I saw him on the floor, I couldn't believe what I had done." As I watched, she began to shake again, "I've never wanted to hurt anyone... But that night, I wanted to kill." Taking the iodine from her hand I pulled her close. Sitting there, I held her as she cried quietly against my shoulder.

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James lay in bed, watching the patterns of shadows swaying gently on the wall as the wind blew the trees. Looking at the clock for the hundredth time that night, he saw that it was almost four in the morning. All night he had tried to figure out what had gone wrong. Trying to lighten the conversation he had quipped some light joke about not expecting her to shoot anyone and she had gone berserk. Next thing he knew, they were yelling at each other and then she had told him never to call back and hung up.

The situation was totally unreasonable; there was no reason for her to react that way. Didn't she understand that he was just trying to protect her? Throwing back the sheets, James got up and went into his study. Sitting down, he opened the bottom drawer of his desk and took out the bottle of scotch he kept there. Pulling out the tumbler that was also in the drawer, he wiped the glass with his shirttail, and filled it.

Knocking back the drink, he slammed the glass on the desk and refilled it. Waiting for the fire to fade from his throat some, he lifted up the glass and tossed it back again. Repeating this cycle several times, James slowly emptied the bottle. Once again slamming the glass on the table, he reached over and poured more liquor into the glass, this time topping it off. As he sat, meticulously making sure the glass held it's maximum capacity, he realized how much the alcohol was affecting him. The warm glow now totally filled his body, erasing the tension and worries of the day, but not the memory. It hadn't wiped the memory of what had happened.

Setting the bottle down, he remembered that his last binge had been because of Zig Zag too. That time, it had been him that had driven her away. Now the tables were turned and he was once again, sitting here at the desk, getting drunk. Angry with himself for crawling back to the bottle he picked up the glass and threw it across the room at the gun case, shattering the glass door with the force of the tumbler's impact.

Getting unsteadily to his feet, he reached over into the corner where he kept a baseball bat. Picking it up, he walked over to the gun case. It was their fault that Zig Zag hated him. They had to pay. Rearing back, he swung the bat at the display cabinet he had so lovingly crafted several years ago. Striking the oak backing, there was a satisfying crunch, as well as the clatter as weapons bounced from their mountings. Continuing to

pound the display, he reduced it to a mass of splintered wood, glass and twisted metal, all the guns scattered on the floor at his feet.

Tossing the baseball bat onto the pile of ruined wood and glass, he staggered from the room. Heading back to bed, James thought about how he needed to get some sleep. He had destroyed the thing that stood between them. In the morning, he would go to Zig Zag and tell her what he had done. Surely she'd take him back. As he collapsed on the bed, the thought continued to repeat in his head, she'd have to take him back, she just had to.

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Sitting on the toilet, I rocked Zig Zag back and forth gently as she cried into my shoulder. I once again thought of Nanuk, and sang her song of motherly protection. As I sang I realized that something wasn't right, there was no power behind it. Suddenly I had a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach. 'Had Nanuk forsaken me? Why was I unable to cross over this evening? Why could I not call on her power?'

Turning inside, I sought out the inner light that was me. I had been taught that it could be a powerful source of energy if you knew how to channel it. I always thought Lisa was blowing smoke, but now I was a believer. If I couldn't reach Nanuk, then I'd have to use my own resources. Finding the light, I summoned forth a strand of energy. While holding onto it with my mind, I came back to the real world. Again singing, I found that the song, though less effective, had a little power behind it. Nanuk had taught me well. I may not be her child anymore, but I still walked the path of the bear, and that was the path of the healer and protector.

After a while I became aware that not only was Zig Zag no longer crying, but also she was asleep. Turning my head sideways, I placed it on top of hers. Still singing quietly, I held her sleeping form while hoping my song would banish the demons from her dreams.

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Getting to the station early, Michael headed in towards his desk. Picking up the mail and messages from his box, he proceeded back to sort them. Coming across a plain envelope with nothing more than his name on it, he opened it as he sat down. Inside he found a note pad page from Kinky's Copiers, on it had been written:

Khansman knows you're on to him.  
He's hired a hit man to kill you and the bear.  
Watch your back but be prepared for an unexpected ally.

Carefully folding up the note, he put it in his pocket. He didn't know who this unexpected help was, but he was glad for the warning. He would have to be extra careful from now on. Time was running short, and he could feel the time for their showdown coming quickly.

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Waking up slowly, Sheila stretched out, luxuriating in the feel of the silk against her fur. Reaching over to where Arden slept, she felt the bed and it was cold. Glancing around she could see he wasn't in the room or adjoining bath. Climbing out, she took her housecoat and went to the bathroom. After taking care of priorities, Sheila wondered out

towards the kitchen, figuring that he was probably cooking Pheasant Under Glass or something ridiculous like that for breakfast.

Reaching the kitchen, she turned on the light. There was no sign of him, or that he had been there yet. Sniffing, she could smell that he and Zig Zag had been there recently, but there was a third smell that she couldn't quite pin down. As she turned to leave the kitchen her eye caught on several small dark spatters on the floor. Kneeling, she rubbed a finger in one and smelled it. It was blood.

Standing up, she felt the blood pounding in her veins. How could there have been blood, his wounds were almost healed. Thinking to herself, "Oh god! Please don't let what I'm thinking have happened," Sheila raced from the kitchen. Quickly searching the house she saw that Zig Zag's room was also empty, but the light was on in the hall bathroom. Rushing to the door she looked in and froze at what she saw.

Arden was sitting on the toilet with Zig Zag in his lap, holding her in an embrace. As she watched, he rocked her back and forth, as one would a small child, singing quietly. His head turned, it lay on top of Zig Zag's.

Relief flooded into her at seeing they were both all right, but there was also betrayal. What the hell was going on here? Why was he holding her like that? As she stepped into the room, she saw his eyes open. Lifting up his head, he put a finger in front of his mouth, to indicate she should be quiet.

Holding her paws up at the scene before her, she shot him a questioning look. Waving her off, she saw him mouth the word 'Later'. Stalking quietly forward, she approached the couple as they sat. Shooting him an accusatory look she saw him roll his eyes to the heavens and clench his jaws tightly shut, as if in pain.

Now standing before them she looked down at Zig Zag. From the look of the fur on her face, she had been crying, hard. As an understanding of what was happening filtered into her brain, Sheila realized that this probably had something to do with James not being here tonight. She had just assumed that he needed to be at home tonight.

Relaxing a little, she leaned against the wall and looked at the sight before her. Obviously something important had happened between them. She only hoped that it wouldn't change his feelings for her. As she stewed in her emotional turmoil, she noticed for the first time that there was blood all over his lower torso and parts of his legs. Leaning around Zig Zag, she saw large gaping scars where Zig Zag had mauled him. Gasping at what she saw, she looked at Arden's face again, Once again shooting a combination of accusation and questioning look, she saw a pleading look come over his face as he mouthed the words 'Later. Please.'

Standing up straight, she turned, and headed for the door. It was time for a very long and hot shower. Afterwards she would find out what the hell was going on here. Why had Zig Zag mauled him? And if he had done something so terribly bad for her to do that, why was she now sleeping in his arms? Shaking her head in confusion, she climbed into the shower. Things would sort themselves out, they always do. She hopped anyway.

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My legs were falling asleep and to top it off, Sheila obviously didn't have a clue what had happened tonight. Flexing the muscles to try to get the blood flowing, I re-arranged Zig Zag so that I could pick her up, hopefully without waking her. Lifting her legs with my left arm, I cradled her head between my right arm and shoulder. As her body shifted on the raw wounds, a new wave of pain swept through me. Taking a couple of deep breaths, I waited for it to pass, then stood up. Walking carefully, I carried her into the master bedroom and laid her down on the bed, trying my best not to wake her. Pulling up the covers over her, I sat on the edge of the bed and watched her sleep. There was no more pain or fear on her face.

Looking at the clock, I realized that it was almost six in the morning. There was no way I was going to wake her now. I had better call the office and let them know she'd be in late today, if she came in at all. Thinking about it, I should call James too.

Leaving the bedroom, I pulled the door closed behind me. Walking down to the bedroom she used as a spare office, I sat down at the desk. She had a Roll-R-Dex file, but flipping through it I could see it was all business numbers. Searching on the desk revealed no other kind of phone book. Opening the drawers, I found a leather day-timer style address book. As I flipped it open to the S section, I started looking for James name and realized that Zig Zag kept more than just addresses in here.

Laughing, I flipped the page. I never thought Zig Zag was the kind of person to rate people's performances. There's were also a rather, colorful description under each entry about the person. I flipped the book over to the V's. Reading to myself, "Sheila got four and a half stars. Her notes are that she's lively, very flexible, easily excitable, and willing to work at the drop of a hat. Down sides, she often gets over-excited and fails to take direction. Also her tongue tickles." That last one got me good. I just had to laugh cause she was right on that spot.

Finding James's entry, I picked up the phone. Dialing his home number and listened to it ring. After about the third ring, an answering machine answered. Waiting for the tone, I left a message, "James, this is Arden. If you're there, please pick up. This is important" Waiting for a few seconds, I continued, "Ok. When you get this message, give me a call either at Zig Zag's or on my cell phone. This is important, please call." Hanging up, I tried his office. Odds are he couldn't sleep either. Once again getting the answering machine, I hung up and tried the cell phone. There was no answer there either.

Sitting back, I thought about it. He may be in the shower or something. We'd have to see. Copying down the relevant information for him and closed the book. I had been tempted to read ZZ's write up on him, but had decided not to. Maybe later, next time I was annoyed at one of them. When sinning, it's best to plan for optimum enjoyment. At least, that's what my brother used to say. Putting the book away, I headed back to the room and lay down.

I was exhausted. I knew I should be tired from lack of sleep, but I was totally wiped out. Closing my eyes, I started to doze off. Just as I was in the comfortable fog between waking and sleeping, a sharp pain in my chest got my attention. Howling, I sat up.

Looking around, I saw Sheila sitting next to me, the medicines in her hand. "By the way, this will sting." Shoving me roughly back on the bed, she continued cleaning the remaining wounds that Zig Zag hadn't gotten to. Wincing as she wiped the wound with a cloth dipped in alcohol, I said, "Some times I don't know why I bother being nice to people. All that happens is I wind up getting shot, mauled and otherwise abused."

Putting more alcohol on the rag, she roughly continued cleaning the cuts, "Mind explaining what happened tonight?" Taking a deep breath, started to explain, "Last night I couldn't sleep, so got up to fix myself some warm milk. I saw Zig Zag outside and joined her. During the conversation, I found out that she and James had gotten into a big fight and split up." Digging into a wound, Sheila snarled, "And that's when you decided to make a move?" **WHAT!**

Enraged, I roared, and then backhanded her, hard. Flying off the bed, she hit the wall. Standing up, I stalked towards her, claws out and showing fangs. "You BITCH! After all you've done to me, after all I've done to PROVE that I love you, you STILL can't wait to accuse me of something!" I was shouting at the top of my voice. Sheila cringed against the wall, covering herself from any attack I made. "I lived for you. I was willing to DIE for you. All I do is out of love for YOU and my FRIENDS! When are you going to get it through your thick skull that I'm not out to screw you over!" I was almost muzzle-to-muzzle with her, enraged. Tunnel vision showed to me only prey.

From over by the door, I heard Zig Zag screaming at me. Turning, I saw her standing in the doorway. I gave her a feral growl for interrupting. Again she yelled, "Stop it!" Looking back down at Sheila, I saw the sheer terror on her face. The fear for her life at the animal she had released from within me.

Turning again, I stalked towards the door. Zig Zag barely got out of the way for me to pass through. Walking to the back door, I headed out onto the porch. Rage still had a hold on me. Looking around, I saw a metal table with some chairs by it. Letting my anger flow, I proceeded to turn the table into a crumpled, twisted mass of metal. Picking it up, I threw it at the fence. Watching it as it bounced off, I felt some of the tension fade from me.

Stumbling over to the grass, I roughly dropped to the ground, and dragged my legs around so they were crossed in front of me. Looking down, I could see that my wounds were bleeding again. Ignoring them, I put my hands on my knees and began some breathing exercises to help center myself. Concentrating on the exercise, I felt the anger and tensions drain away, eventually approaching an equilibrium.

As I meditated, I heard someone walking quietly across the grass; I spoke quietly, "You don't need to try to sneak by me. I'm not going to bite you." As they walked around in front of me, I heard them sit down. Opening my eyes for a second, I saw Zig Zag sitting cross legged about four feet away. Closing them I asked, "Is Sheila going to be ok?" "Yes, I think so, though she's lucky you didn't break her jaw." I could hear the anger in her voice, "Just what the hell was that about anyway?"

Collapsing forward on myself, I put my hands up to my face and rubbed them back over my head. Opening my eyes, I gave Zig Zag a pained look; "She pushed me over the line Zig Zag. With all I've been through, everything I've done to prove my love for her, she still can't accept that it's her I love." Still scowling, she asked, "Is that any reason to hit her?" Defensively, I pointed to my chest, "When I explained about your argument with James, she accused me of getting these because I tried to make a move on you with James out of the picture."

That took Zig Zag by surprise. Rubbing my fingers in the blood, I drew them under my eyes, and down the cheeks by my muzzle, as if it was war paint, "Every time I try to help someone, I get it in the ass. I stand up for you, and someone tries to kill me. I save Sheila from getting sprayed with bullets, and someone tries to kill us in our bed. I help you tonight and this morning she accuses me of trying to make out with you. How much SHIT can a person take!" Seeing her flinch at the last part, I took a few deep breaths trying to calm down. I was shaking from the adrenaline, on the verge of tears, "It's not 'Thank you Arden for trying to make sure Sheila's safe', no it's 'What the hell are you doing with guns.' It's not 'Wow, you took a mauling to help Zig Zag work out her problem tonight?' no it's 'You couldn't wait to try to jump into bed with her.' Christ, I don't know why I try some times." I could feel the tears running down my face. I didn't care. It wasn't worth the effort.

After sitting there for a little time, I heard Zig Zag get up. Flinching as she grabbed the fur on my cheeks, I opened my eyes in time to catch a kiss from her. This wasn't any motherly peck either. Letting go of me, she said quietly, "Thank you. For what you did tonight. I'll go talk to Sheila. I'll explain everything. Don't worry about it." As she walked away, I didn't think about what she had said as much as the fact that she kissed a lot like Sheila. Her tongue tickled. Looking down, I talked to my crotch, "Don't get any ideas, she's spoken for."

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Zig Zag found Sheila in the bathroom, examining her face. Leaning in the doorway, Zig Zag just watched her. Spotting Zig Zag in the door, Sheila probed her jaw with one finger, "I think he knocked a tooth loose." Unemotionally, she replied, "I can't say as I like the idea of him hitting you, but I must admit that if what he says is true, then you deserved it."

Her eyes wide open, Sheila shot an angry, indignant look at Zig Zag, "I *deserved* it?..." Remembering what Nanuk had shown her, and how her automatic defensive reactions had nearly killed Arden, Sheila calmed down a little. Leaning heavily against the counter she thought about it, "I suppose I did." Turning, she hitched herself up on the counter, "It's just after seeing you in his arms tonight...." Giving a pleading look to Zig Zag, she shrugged, "I just... I don't know."

Walking over to the counter, Zig Zag jumped up beside her and scooted up so they were touching. Putting an arm around Sheila, she gave her a little hug, "Kiddo, you just aren't used to having a man that actually loves you. It's a new experience. Granted, you're on a learning curve, but I have to warn you, if you don't pull up your grades, I'm afraid you're going to lose him." Nodding, Sheila hung her head, "I know. It's just so ingrained, I'm not



## Chapter 31

sure I'll ever be able to get rid of it." Thinking she asked, "Why did you maul him tonight anyway?"

Sighing, Zig Zag put her hands in front of her, and kept them in her lap. Hanging her head low, she explained to Sheila about her past, and what had happened. "The mauling was my fault. I just felt trapped. I needed to get away. I never even gave him a chance to let go. I just started fighting to get away. So you see, all he was trying to do was help, and as a result, I almost put him in the hospital." Sitting side by side, the two women thought about how they both had let their emotional reactions potentially destroy their relationships.

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After I felt that I would be reasonable company again, I stood up. Swaying slightly, I was surprised by a wave of dizziness. Kneeling until it passed, I tried standing again. Still a little unsteady, took a few breaths to steady myself. Looking at the ground I could see where the blood had stained the grass. Looking down, I saw that my fur was still tacky, but didn't appear to be wet with fresh blood. Unfortunately, I realized that I had lost the better of a pint or two of blood. I'd have to be careful, or I could easily get into trouble. Walking into the house I realized that I had left a bloody handprint on the door. Washing up in the sink, I got the blood off my paws. I then took a wet paper towel and cleaned up the door and handle. Tossing the paper towel in the trash, I headed back for the shower.

Walking in, I saw Sheila and Zig Zag sitting on the counter, both looked pretty depressed. Chuckling, I quipped, "Bad news girls. Despite your abuse, I think I'm going to live." Both of them looked up in horror at what I said. Shaking my head I stumbled over to the commode and sat down, "You girls have got to learn to lighten up."

With a worried look on their faces, both Zig Zag and Sheila came over to me. Waving them away, "I'm all right. I'm just tired. In fact, I think I'll just go lay down on the bed again." Pushing me back down, Zig Zag turned, to Sheila, "Sheila, call the doctor. Ask if he can come over here. Go pick him up if you need to." Nodding, Sheila headed out of the room.

Grabbing the fur on the front of my shoulders, Zig Zag pulled. Getting my attention with the pain, she managed to haul me up. Pushing me back towards the shower, she said, "Sorry kiddo, but you're NOT going to be climbing on my bed with all that blood on you." Giving a sly smile, I chuckled, "Zig Zag, what if Sheila catches us?" Giving me a scowl, she lead me by the ear over to the shower. Holding me against the shower door, she reached in and turned it on.

Reaching over with my arm, I turned it off, "Nothing personal Zig Zag, but you need to worry more about James, not me. I'll just sit here until the doctor comes." As I started to slide down, she once again grabbed the fur on my chest to force me to stand up, "No way, James can wait." Looking down, I focused on her face, "Are you sure? He's not answering his home, cell or work phones. I wasn't able to get him at all."

A look of concern crossed her face as this sunk in, making a decision, she started to reach in to turn the shower on. Grabbing the fur on her back below her neck, I hauled up with all my strength, and lifted her up. Letting out a small shriek, she grabbed my arm

with both hands, claws puncturing the skin. Holding her away from me, I stumbled over to the door, catching myself on the frame. Giving a little shove as I let go, Zig Zag stumbled into the room and fell onto the bed. Turning her head, she shot an angry look. I bared my teeth and growled, "Damn it! Why do you people always have to argue with me?" Finding the pull-tab for the door, I closed it half way, "I'm going to take a shower now, alone. You call James. I don't want to see you're face around me again until you've done so."

Closing the door, I took a deep breath and straightened up. Walking back over to the shower, I turned it on. Setting the water so it was just lukewarm, I climbed in and closed the door. Setting the nozzle on mist, I let it soak into the fur, watching the patterns in the water as it rinsed the blood away. Taking the medicated shampoo off of the shelf, I began to massage it into the fur. As it began to hit the wounds, a fresh pain of agony struck me, forcing me to my knees. Unlike the iodine, this stuff burned and kept burning. Leaning back, I leaned against the wall as the water started to wash the shampoo away. The pain spreading as the medicine diluted into all the wounds was overwhelming. The last thing that passed through my mind was that next time I needed to use baby shampoo.

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Getting into the office early, Doug heard James's phone ringing. Looking in, he saw that James wasn't in yet. Walking over, he picked up the phone, "Sheppard Computer Systems, this is Doug." The voice on the other end was female, "Doug, is James in yet?" Thinking for a second, Doug recognized the voice, "Zig Zag? Is that you?" She sounded almost frantic, "Yes. Have you heard from James lately?" He could tell she sounded concerned, "No, not since yesterday afternoon. Why? What's up Zig Zag?" She gave a small curse, "I screwed up Doug. I lost it and went feral on him. I'm afraid for him. There's no answer at his house or on his cell phone."

Concerned, Doug pulled up James's appointment calendar on the computer and verified he had no appointments this morning, "OK Zig, I don't see anything on his calendar, but to be sure, I'll go over to his place. He's probably outside fixing something, you know how he is." He heard a sigh, "Thanks Doug, I really appreciate it. Please call me and let me know if you find him?" Giving a false cheer to his voice, he promised, "No problem Zig, I'll make sure you're the first person I talk to." Hanging up the phone, he quickly headed for the exit. He only hopped that James hadn't done something stupid.

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Getting to work, Daniel Khansman sat down in a good mood. The news had plastered the rat's demise all over the airwaves. Finally, he had found an assassin that could earn his keep. Next he'd send him after the cop and finally the bear. This was going to be a very productive day. As his cell phone rang, Daniels hit the do-not-disturb on his office phone and answered it, "Yes?"

A male voice, "You've been paying attention to the news?"

Smiling, Daniel let out a little laugh, "Yes. Very spectacular. Good job."

Male voice, "There's a problem. The cop was there. He got to the rat before he got toasted."

Still in a good mood, Daniel replied, "What's the problem, he's next on your list, right?"

The other voice hesitated, "He's got outside help."

The smile vanished from Daniels voice, "What do you mean, 'outside help'?"

The other voice sounded annoyed, "I saw the cop go into the building about two hours before our target got there. I backtracked his steps and found his car. I had plenty of supplies so I wired him too. The problem is that he drove away without a scratch. On top of that, I found the package in the seat of my car. Whoever did it, put a red "lip kiss" sticker on it."

Growling, Daniel knew it had to be the tiger. He couldn't tell this guy or he'd bail on him. "Fine. Do it direct then, nothing fancy. Just make sure he's eliminated."

Hanging up the phone, Daniel put it back in his coat. That bitch was going to ruin his plans. Why is it that the only competent person he could find had to turn out to be a total asshole?

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I woke up on the bed with Zig Zag hovering over me. My chest felt like she had been using it as a scratching post again, "Why did you take me out? I was just getting comfortable." Giving a derisive snort she continued to do something to my chest, "The doc says that you're lucky you didn't bleed to death in there. Next time, let us take care of you, ok?" It took me a few seconds for what she had said, "The doc's been here already?" Nodding, she finished applying the surgical glue to the last wound, "That's right. He was here for almost an hour stitching you up. You've got almost fifty stitches in your chest. That's not counting the smaller ones he showed me how to close up using glue." Looking down, I saw that although there were still long wounds in my chest, they had been closed up.

Laying my head back down, I reached up and took Zig Zag's hand, "Thanks pretty lady." Smiling down at me, she pulled the covers up over my chest, "Next time I tell you to do something, you do it. No arguments." Chuckling, I let my eyes close, "Like that will ever happen."

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Pulling up to Zig Zag's house, Michael flashed his badge to the rent-a-cop that was posted by her front door. Getting out of his car, he looked around and spotted one of the three snipers he knew should be around. Bulldog was smart. They always let their prey know where one is as a calling card, the other two would be impossible to spot from the outside. Walking up to the front door, he rang the bell and waited. As the door opened, he once again saw Zig Zag, and she looked like hell warmed over, "Is everything all right here madam?"

Zig Zag gave the cop a sour look, "What do you want? We didn't call the cops." Shaking his head at her attitude, he forged ahead, "I need to speak to Arden. I understand he's here." Glancing back into the house, she told the officer, "I'm sorry, but he's unavailable right now."

## Chapter 31

Sighing he gave her a hard look, "It's very important that I speak to him. Please tell him I'm here." Shaking her head, she refused again, "Really. You can't talk to him right now."

Putting his head down for a second, he took a deep breath, glaring at Zig Zag, he stated, "We can do this the easy way, and we can do this the hard way. It's your decision. I'd prefer the easy way, especially as his life may depend on the outcome of our conversation." Realizing that he wasn't going to give up, Zig Zag backed into the doorway, and closed it behind him.

Leading the cop back to the spare bedroom, she pointed him through the door. As he walked into the bedroom, Michael spotted the bear in bed. He appeared to be sleeping. Entering the room, Michael checked the bathroom out of habit. Spotting bloody towels, he gave Zig Zag a hard look. Just leaning against the doorway, she gave him no satisfaction. Walking over to the bed, he yanked the sheets back.

Seeing the ragged scars on his chest, he bared his fangs and stared at Zig Zag, "What the hell happened to him?" Looking a little uncomfortable, she waved to him, "I warned him not to scratch." Checking the wounds, he could see that they had been professionally tended to. Pulling the covers back up over him, he walked over to Zig Zag, "Unless you have an objection, I'll wait for him to wake up." Giving a reluctant nod, Zig Zag went into the bathroom and continued to clean up.

Walking over to the far corner of the room, he sat down in the armchair to wait.

# Chapter 32

My destiny, or mission impossible?

Returning to her apartment, Tigger sat down to relax. It had been a most productive night. Thanks to her wiretap on Khansman's phone, she knew about the rodent's imminent demise. The fact that the Detective had gotten to him first was a bonus.

It did however force her hand. Keeping an eye on her competitor, she had watched as he wired up the detective's car. That cat was too important to her plans to get blown up now. Removing the package, she put it in the front seat with a 'Wild Cherry' sticker on the top. The look on his face when he opened the door was priceless. Her only regret was that she didn't have a telephoto camera at the time.

Climbing onto the hammock that she kept strung up by her monitoring equipment, she checked the locator beacon she had placed on her competition's car. Showing that he was at his hotel, she programmed the monitor to go off if it left a two-mile radius. Flipping the security system from monitor to armed mode, she then curled up. A good catnap would go over well about now. She would be busy later tonight.

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As I lay on the soft bed, I smiled at the memory of Zig Zag's kiss. This was a hell of a time to be dedicated to one female. Reaching up with my hand I touched the place on my muzzle where her lips had locked onto mine, and realized something was wrong. As my eyes flew open, I looked down at my hand and it was normal.

Looking down, I could see that I was back in my old body, naked sitting on a soft moss. Gazing at my environment, I saw that I was walled in on all sides by a tall, greenish looking barrier. Standing, I walked over to it so as to get a better look. As I approached, I saw that it appeared to be made up of scales, each as tall as I was, overlapping. Moving closer I saw my reflection in one, it was myself as a bear. Moving along the barrier, I saw different images of myself, human, dog, bird, as fire. Stopping, I reached out and touched the reflection. As my hand came into contact with the surface, I felt heat. The warmth wrapped me in a cocoon of protective energies. Looking down at myself, I saw that I was covered in light blue flickering flames, similar to that of natural gas when it burns. Removing my hand, the flames flickered and vanished.

Backing away, I looked around and saw that the barrier tapered off towards the distance. Setting off along the wall, I watched my reflection and it went through infinite variations of a theme, showing me the possibilities that existed. Nearing the end, I saw it move. It curled towards me. It wasn't a barrier! It was a tail! Spinning around I followed the top back up and saw that I had been sleeping in the curl created by the tail of an enormous dragon.

As my eyes eventually reached the head, I saw it swing back to look at me. The long, sinuous neck undulated with massive muscles as it moved the head towards me. Panicking I backed away, tripping over my feet.

It laughed.

## Chapter 32

The laughter wasn't something I heard as much as felt. Paralyzed with fear, I was unable to move.

As the head got within ten or fifteen feet of me, I felt the hot wind as it exhaled through its nose. The mixture of odors was so overwhelming that I almost gagged at the smell. Turning away from me, the head settled on the ground, its eye looking down at me, "You have nothing to be afraid of little one. I did not expend my energies to bring you here just to eat you."

Gasping for breath as the adrenaline pumped through my system, I swallowed and asked, "Who are you?" I saw the lips at the back of its mouth curl upwards in a parody of a smile. Without opening its mouth, I once again felt the voice wash over me like a physical presence, "We are the Dragon Eternal. We are not one being, but all Dragon spirits united so that we may perform this function."

Getting a better grip on myself, I sat up, crossing my legs in front of myself. "I take it then, that I'm back in the spirit realm. If so, why you? Why am I not with Nanuk?" I felt the air flowing from behind me as it began to breathe in, "Bear no longer has sufficient power to bring you to her. By bringing your woman across the barriers this morning to save your life, she used the last of her remaining power. Even then, the dragon of that realm had to help her return. She now rests, trying to regain power for the next stage."

Nanuk had been responsible for what happened with Sheila. But how is it that a force of nature such as Nanuk could have depleted herself. Answering my unasked question, Dragon explained, "Unlike Dragon, Bear is not an eternal force. No creature is as Dragon. All must be renewed. For many years Bear has searched for an emissary capable of doing this. In you she has placed all hopes."

Giving me a few moments to let that sink in, "From before you were borne, Bear conspired with Dragon and Spider to ensure that the path of the healer and protector would not be lost. In these days of man, your world has all but lost touch with the spirits that guide your kind. Our power is diminished to a point where only a scant few may feel us. It was Spider who convinced Eagle to get the talisman to the doctor. It was Dragon who got snake to cause him to become female in your world. It was Bear who convinced her to give the talisman to you. You are here at great costs to the spirits. If you fail, much will be lost."

I felt the weight of his words as they sank into me. I remembered from the totemic writings that Spider was the schemer, the planner, but Dragons were an anomaly. There were so many different texts on them. "Dragon is many things. Right now we are all dragons combined. Dragons are the guardians of the realms, protecting them from the chaos caused by the dark. They are the ones who guard the spirit realm and ensure that none go but to their proper places. The talisman that you have is a key to this barrier that we cannot deny. You must use the talisman and get to the next phase of our plan before Bear is lost to us all." Shaking my head, I let it hang, "I no longer have the talisman."

Again it chuckled, "The talisman will be returned to you soon. You shall continue your journey. Dragon has too much power invested in this for you to fail us." Curious, I looked back up at him, "What is your relationship with Bear? Why do you care so much."

I felt the warm breeze of its exhale, "Dragon is an agent of change as well as a guardian. By your nature you change those around you for the better. This in turn gives Bear more power to work with as it is a healing act. It also gives Dragon power as it is a change for the better. In this, Dragon and Bear are closely related. If Bear is lost, Dragon will be greatly diminished. For this reason, Dragon now must devote more power to you than he will for his own children. Though you are a child of Bear, it is Dragon's path you must walk. For this reason Dragon has brought you here. As you walk the path of Dragon, you must beware rage. Bear is mighty and will attack only to protect. Dragon has no such qualms, and is easily enraged. You must guard from this lest you be consumed by the power we must grant you."

That would explain this morning with Sheila. I shouldn't have reacted that way. It was the influence of the Dragon that was partially responsible. I always had an extremely long temper, but when it finally broke, I tended to get extremely violent. A lot of money had been spent replacing broken computer equipment after one of my rages. God help anyone around me now with my temper shortened. "That is not true." The voice brought me out of my thoughts. "Your patience will not be lessened. But you must guard against the rage. As bear, you would not have attacked your woman, you would have taken it out on something inanimate, as you did the table outside."

Nodding I understood, "I understand, but you said I had a mission. What is this mission." I got a feeling of immense satisfaction from the dragon, "Duty and Honor, these too are traits of Dragon. Bear chose well for us. You must go to the realm of the Sorcerer Ruddygore and obtain the Lamp of Lakesh from him."

Thinking I tried to remember the name, it was familiar. With a snap of my fingers I had it, "Throckmorton P Ruddygore! That's from Jack L. Chalker's 'River of the Dancing Gods' books." Again, the breeze as he inhaled, "Yes, he is the chronicler of your world that has seen that reality. Though he has shown you a window into the realm, beware for he has not shown all that is there and some of it was changed to be more.... palatable to those in your world. Do not presume you know something to be the truth simply because of his chronicles."

Nodding, I could understand that. I had already made a grievous mistake with James; I didn't intend to make the same mistake. Thinking about Ruddygore it occurred to me that I should verify what I know, "Is Ruddygore the servant of the light as Chalker has written? Or did he gloss the character over for the book?" The eyes closed slightly on the dragon as it thought, "He is very powerful in his realm, and is no friend of the guardian, but we believe him to be trustworthy. Although he deals with the dark forces on occasion, his actions have always been for the betterment of the light."

All right, I could accept that. He was a good guy for the most part though he did occasionally deal with the dark. But how was I supposed to use the amulet to get there? Just as I was about to ask the question, the dragon piped up, "The talisman works by

granting a wish, similar to that of the lamp. Its curse is that it grants the wish by transporting the person into another reality where the event can come true." Thinking back to when I got moved over, I remembered my off handed remark about 'wishing that Sheila could talk'." The result was it's bringing me to this world. "Yes, you understand now. The curse is that it will *never* take a person to the same reality twice. No matter how many times you may use the amulet, you can never use it to get home." That was a curse all right. I could see how a person might want to eventually go home. They might get a close copy of the world, but never the original thing.

The warm breeze of the dragon's exhale captured my attention for a second. "Beware though, the amulet must rest between uses. It takes time for it to gather the power for each event. If you make a mistake and are transported to the wrong reality, you must be prepared to wait for it to become ready once again." That made sense, "How will I know it's ready?" "You will feel an itch upon the mark which it has inflicted upon you."

Looking down, I saw that again the mark was missing. Remembering what Nanuk had said about it, I could understand why the dragon didn't want it here either. Looking back up, I asked, "I presume that if I need guidance, I should come to you?" Its eyelid drooped for a moment, as a kind of nod, "Yes, I have granted you a portion of my power, but do not waste it. If nothing else be true of us, we hoard our power as we do that which we treasure. For us to grant you this thing is in itself proof of our dedication."

Nodding, one last thing occurred to me, "I realize you've granted me power. But when I went to sing Nanuk's song this morning, there was no power behind it. Not until I used that, which was my own."

Rearing up, his body shrank, changing into that of a slim, dark colored human male. Sitting down across from me, he smiled, "We were getting a headache from focusing on you." I had to laugh. I knew exactly how he felt after spending hours working on lead figurines, painting them. With a wave of his hand, he continued, "Our powers are not attuned to the path of Bear. Bear was most proud of you when you used your own light to give power to the song. But you must be careful, for this use can bring a terrible price. It is the reason you were so weak afterwards, and also why your body had trouble healing the damage done to you. Each person has a finite supply of power available at a given time. If you draw too heavily on it, you could destroy yourself. Heed this warning, for in your journey, your healing powers will most likely be used."

I understood why I had been in so much trouble after singing to Zig Zag. Before hand, I had barely felt the wounds. Heck they had practically stopped bleeding by the time I was tending to them in the bathroom. Afterwards though, when I re-injured them, they continued to bleed. In my desire to help Zig Zag, I had unknowingly done grievous damage.

Following my train of thought, the dragon waited for me to finish my thoughts. "Now it is time to teach you that which Bear did not. You're first attempt at harnessing your power was a valiant one, but you wasted much energy. It is time to teach you how to properly tap your spirit as well as draw power from outside yourself, so that you may accomplish your role without inviting your demise."



As he began to explain the process of manipulating the energies of the spirit, a part of my mind was already ranging afar, trying to prepare itself for whatever challenges may come.

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As Doug drove up to James's house, he didn't see anything particularly out of the ordinary. Parking, he walked up to the front door and pressed the doorbell. There had been no answer on the way over, and that had worried him. Peeking in the window, he saw that everything looked normal, though all the lights were off.

Waiting a few minutes, he rang the doorbell several times in a row and waited. Once again there was no answer. Heading around to the back of the house, he came to the back porch. Reaching up under a planter, he detached the spare key that James kept there incase he ever got locked out. Using it on the back door, he entered the house.

Looking around in the dining area and kitchen, he saw that nothing was out of place. There weren't even dirty dishes from breakfast. Walking back towards the master bedroom, he caught a whiff of alcohol as he neared the study. 'Not again.' Looking into the study, he saw an open bottle of scotch, still partially filled, sitting sideways on the desk. On the wall, remnants of the gun case that James had built so long ago. Stepping in the room, he saw that it had been systematically destroyed with a baseball bat, now discarded on the pile of rubble. Leading away from the room, was a small trail of blood.

Following it, he realized that James must have cut his paw on the glass and been too drunk to notice it. Pushing open the door to the room, he saw James laying on the bed, curled into a small ball. The sheets under his right paw were crusted with dried blood.

Approaching his friend, Doug checked to make sure he was breathing all right. Seeing that James was in no imminent danger of suffocation, he looked at the cut paw. There was a good-sized cut on the side of his paw where he had brushed against some broken glass. Probing it to make sure there was no glass embedded, James stirred, "Ouch, what the hell? Doug? What are you doing here?" Seeing that the wound didn't have any glass in it, he let it drop back to the bed.

"Ouch." James sat up quickly reaching for his paw, then got an odd look on his face, 'Oh god, I think I'm going to puke.'" Shaking his head Dough grabbed James by the waist and hauled him over to the bathroom. Setting him not too gently on the floor, he watched as his friend emptied the remains of his stomach.

Shaking his head, he asked, "You just don't learn do you?" James mumbled something incomprehensible in-between heaves. "Either build up some alcohol tolerance, or give it up. You're no good at being a drunk." Turning to leave, Doug headed back out to the bedroom. Going to the phone, he saw that James had yanked it out of the wall.

Dropping the cord, Doug went back to the study. Sitting down at the desk, he lifted up the bottle and screwed on the cap. Picking up the phone, he called up Kelly. He'd need her help to get things cleaned up here. As he listened to the phone ring, he thought about James, hoping that the guy was going to get through this relationship in one piece.

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Sabrina was back on campus, and it felt kind of strange. No longer taking classes, she wasn't used to coming here any more. Walking into the library, she went down to the basement. She had emailed a friend that was still working on his degree about the photocopies. He had recommended the old man downstairs who was the caretaker for the old books and manuscripts they kept in the special research section.

Finding his office she knocked on the door. Standing there nervously, she waited for someone to answer. Looking around, she saw a young raccoon coming down the hall carrying a bunch of books. Knocking again, she wondered if he was there.

As the raccoon, got close, he asked, "Looking for old man Jacobs?" Checking the name on her notes, Sabrina nodded, "Yes, do you know where he is?" As the raccoon came even with the door, he shifted the books then suddenly kicked the door, hard. Jumping back, Sabrina gave a small "Eeeek" of surprise. A voice from in the room yelled, "What?" Giving Sabrina a smile, the raccoon nodded towards the door, "Yep, he's in. He was just asleep. The old man's a little hard of hearing. Go on in." With that, he scooted around Sabrina and continued on his way.

Watching the raccoon for a second, Sabrina just shook her head. Opening the door, she peeked in, "Are you Mr. Jacobs?" The old man behind the desk looked up at Sabrina. His eyes widening slightly, he started to clean up his desk, "Why yes my dear, I most certainly am. Please come in, come in! It's not often I get visitors down here. At least not pretty ones." Taking a pile of old books off of a chair, he dumped them in the corner on top of a larger pile. Watching for a second to make sure the pile didn't collapse, he turned, smiled and then slid into his chair, "How may I be of service young lady?"

Taking out the photocopies, Sabrina passed them over, "I understand that you might know something about this." Taking the photocopies, he picked up a pair of small glasses and clipped them to the bridge of his nose, "Ahhh, yes. Let us see here." Examining the papers, he "OOOoo'ed" and "AHHHhhh'ed" several times. At one point he took out a magnifying glass, "Too bad you don't have the originals, there is much detail that a photocopy doesn't catch."

Picking up a pencil, he took an old notepad and upon finding a blank page, began taking notes. "This is a most interesting document," he said distractedly. Glancing over his spectacles, he stopped writing, "This is for some kind of comparative religion class?" Not sure how to answer, Sabrina figured she'd wing it, "Well, a friend asked me if I could find something about them. I'm pretty sure it's not for a comparative religion class though. I don't quite think she's the type." Cocking his head for a second, he then nodded and returned to his notes. Again speaking in a distracted voice, he commented, "There are at least twelve different religious symbologies represented here, probably more. There are glyphs and runes from several different iconic languages too. This is most interesting."

Looking up at Sabrina again, "You don't have access to the originals do you?" Shaking her head, she shrugged, "I don't but I'll ask the person who got them for me." Nodding, he put the papers down, "I will need to do some research on this text. It will take some time. If you don't mind, I'm going to hold on to these photocopies." Taking out a business card, he held it out to Sabrina, "Call me back tomorrow. This is *indeed* a most interesting text.

I will give it my full attention tonight." Thinking to herself that this guy had gotten farther than anyone at the anthropology or archeology department, she might as well let him hold on to them.

Taking the card she stood up, "Thank you very much. I will be in touch." Turning she walked to the door until she remembered something. Turning back, she asked, "Ummm, will there be any charge for this?" Looking up in confusion, it took a second for the old man to digest what she said, "Normally yes. We can't have slackers coming to us for their homework, but you have brought me something quite unique, yes, quite unique. No charge for you." Smiling, he dove back into his work.

Closing the door behind her, Sabrina looked back at it for a second. That has got to be her weird encounter for the year. At least she hoped so. Shaking her head, she walked quickly to the stairs. She still had to stop off at the graphics company and pick up the new proofs before going back to work.

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I don't know how long I spent being instructed by the dragon, but it felt like days. Even though we hadn't taken any rests, I still felt refreshed. Ending the lesson, he told me it was time to return. Taking his old shape again, I walked along his tail, examining the reflections until I reached the one I wanted. Putting my hand out, I touched it. The warmth enveloped me. Pushing hard, I felt it give like a plastic sheet.

Passing through the scale, I found myself standing in the bedroom. There was a familiar form sitting in the armchair, but he didn't look right. There was an aura around him. It didn't look like it belonged here. It made him look out of place. Turning to the bathroom, I saw Zig Zag cleaning the shower. I guess the blood had been given a chance to dry.

Walking over to the bed, I looked down at the damage to my chest. It was bad, but it could be healed. I just had to be careful how I did it. Closing my eyes, I breathed in, willing myself back into my body. Feeling the silk against my fur, I let my eyes open.

Looking into the corner, I saw Detective Jones again, "Hello Detective, how are you feeling today?" His head snapped up from the paper he had been reading, "You're awake." Nothing gets by this guy. Standing he walked around the bed to where I lay. Squatting down next to the bed, he got a very serious look on his face. Nodding to the wounds, he asked, "Who did that to you?" Gesturing for him to come closer, I whispered, "Take it from me, *never* pull on Zig Zag's tail. *Never*."

As he leaned back, he gave me an odd look. I couldn't help but to chuckle. Seeing my smile he frowned a little. Some people just couldn't take a joke, "I'm sure you didn't come here to inquire about my health." Nodding, he glanced at Zig Zag to verify she wasn't listening, "Do you have any idea who's trying to kill you yet?" This guy never gives up, "Nope. Still no idea." Seeing his expression, I suddenly got the idea he did, "But you do don't you. You know who it is."

Glancing at Zig Zag again, he leaned closer, "I don't have anything that would stand up in court, especially as their both dead. I've discovered from two different sources, that the District Attorney has put a contract out on you." Seeing the disbelief on my face, he

continued, "Not only on you, but on me also. He's found out about my investigation. You remember the news yesterday about the raccoon parts that had been found all around town? He was one of the people."

This guy was serious. That SOB had a contract out on my ass. If that was true, then everyone around me was in serious danger. This wasn't just some crackpot doing a drive by, or a couple of stalkers, but professional hired killers. Watching the play of emotions on my face, he continued, "I'm going to give you a username and password to a system on the Internet. I'll be sending encrypted copies of all the information I dig up, as I find it, to that system. If anything happens to me, I want you to take the user ID and password to someone in the press, someone you think might be sympathetic. They can pull down the information and deliver it to the public. Nodding I asked, "What kind of encryption? And what's the password?"

Taking a floppy from his jacket pocket, he flashed it to me. The label was from ZZ Studios. It was a sampler diskette they sent out, "Good camouflage." Opening the drawer next to the bed, he put it inside the phonebook that lay at the bottom of the drawer. Closing it, he whispered, "The password is 'revenant'." Thinking, I remembered, "An avenging spirit."

Raising an eyebrow, I could tell that his respect for me went up a bit, "For now, avoid open spaces. Make sure you aren't near any cars when they are started; one of his people was killed last night like that. Lastly, be careful of any packages that you receive. Since nobody supposedly knows who you are, assume that nobody should send you anything. Even an ordinary envelope can be lethal." If this guy was for real, then the secretary at the Studio was in serious trouble. Frowning a little, I looked beyond him. Zig Zag was done, "OK. I've got your number in my cell phone. If anything strange happens, I'll let you know right away. I expect you to do the same for me."

Standing up, he put his paw out. Taking it, we shook hands. Nodding to Zig Zag, he turned back to me. "I'll give you a call every few hours. If you don't hear from me in six.... well, you know what to do." Following Zig Zag, he left the room.

As soon as they were gone, I tossed the covers back and got out of the bed. Swaying for a second, I steadied myself and took a deep breath. Moving into the bathroom, I checked myself in the mirror. Philippe was going to kill me, that or he'd maul Zig Zag. Her claws had trashed the fur along with the skin. The doctor had to cut some away in order to close the ragged tears. Continuing over to the john, I relieved myself, then headed back out into the bedroom. Taking a pair of shorts from my bag I was putting them on as Zig Zag came back.

Standing in the door, she made a 'Gack' sound. Shaking my head, I pulled the trunks up, pulling the fur out from around the band. Walking over to me she grabbed my arm, "What do you think you're doing out of bed?" Looking down, first at her hand, then her face, "I'd say I was getting dressed. And just to be fair, since you insisted on watching from the door way, I expect you to give me the same opportunity next time you're getting dressed."

For a second she had the most indignant look on her face until she caught on, "Don't try to change the subject mister. You're supposed to be in bed." Shaking my head, I wind milled my arm quickly to break her grip, "I'm all right Zig Zag. Like I said before, I heal fast." That was an understatement. I felt totally renewed by the powers of the dragon. I'd have to be careful not to over do it.

As I started to move around her, she grabbed my arm again and squeezed hard. Her claws didn't puncture the skin, but they got my attention. Reflexively I wind milled my arm again, this time sidestepping towards her I pinned her arm between my arm and my body. Bearing my teeth, I brought my other arm back in preparation for a palm strike. The look of terror on her face brought the dragons warning back to me.. Relaxing I let her go, "Please, don't ever grab me like that again. It's a trained reflex I have to fight."

Backing away from me, she hit the bed and fell back, "Who the hell trains people like that." Turning, I walked to the doorway. Changing my mind, I stopped. Still not looking at Zig Zag, I answered her question; "I got a Visa to go to Japan as an exchange student when I was in high school. When I graduated, I wanted to stay and go to college. They agreed to extend my Visa if I would join the SDF... Self Defense Force, their version of the military, when I graduated. I spent four years in their version of special operations because of certain aptitudes I had. That and I was a gaijin, an outsider. I would be useful where their own people would be easily recognized. After almost ten years I resigned and came back to the states. I had had my fill of Japan and it's politics." Looking back at her, I saw that she had calmed down, "They trained me to kill by reflex. When you used your claws, you triggered the reflex because I didn't expect it."

Getting off the bed, she walked over to me, "How much do you remember of your old life?" Looking down at my palm, I thought about it. "Let's go sit down in the living room, this is going to take a while."

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Driving back from the hospital, Sheila had stopped by the apartment. The carpet people had her room all torn up, the furniture was in the living room. Going to the vanity, she picked up the box that held the medallion. Taking it out, she slipped it around her neck, and tucked it in her shirt. Closing the box, she replaced it on the table. Taking some extra clothes from the dresser, she placed them in the grocery bag she had brought.

According to the guys working on the carpet, they'd be all done tomorrow. As much as she loved Zig Zag as a friend, she'd be glad to get back in her own bed. Heading back out to her car, she climbed in and backed out. Driving away, she looked forward to tonight. She had a lot of making up to do, and the outfit she had just gotten out of the drawer would certainly help set the stage.

# Chapter 33

There can be no rest for the wicked, or the good guys for that matter.

Zig Zag was pacing back and forth in the living room, "You expect me to believe this load of tripe?" I could only shrug, "Believe what you will. I can't keep this charade up anymore. If what that cop told me this morning is true, I can't be pussy footing around my past with you."

Hearing me talk about Detective Jones, Zig Zag stopped and looked at me, "What did he tell you?" Gesturing for her to sit down, I waited until she did, "That he had determined who's out to kill me." I could see this had her attention, "He's gotten the same name from two different people, both now dead. One of them was the raccoon they've been finding pieces of all over town." She gave a small shiver at the memory of the graphic news report we had seen last night, "Who is it? Are they going to arrest him?"

Shaking my head, I leaned forward, "They can't. Both people are now dead. Also the information wasn't gotten under the most legal of circumstances." Her lips thinned into a straight line. After a few moments, she asked again, "Who is it?" Looking around for a second, I decided the best way was to just say it, "The new DA. Khansman."

I could see the disbelief on her face, "Are you serious? That's crazier than your first story." Shaking my head, I disagreed, "It's not my story, it's Detective Jones' story. According to him, the DA has a contract out not only on me, but also him because of his investigation. From the way he was talking, I believe him. He was absolutely convinced that the DA is the man."

She started to giggle. Running a shaky hand through her hair, she looked at me, "This is insane. First you claim to be someone from an alternate reality, brought here by a magic amulet. Next I've got some paranoid cop who's convinced that the DA's out to get the two of you. What else can happen?" I've learned not to ask questions like that. Someday she might also.

The phone in the living room rang. Since it was on the table next to me, I answered it, "Hello?" There was a pause on the other end, and then a male voice asked, "Is this Zig Zag's?" It was an unfamiliar voice, "Yes it is, who's calling please?" Relieved, the voice answered, "This is Doug, may I speak to her please?" Agreeing, I handed the phone to Zig Zag, whispering the name 'Doug.'

Snatching up the phone, she talked, "Doug?... He's all right?... But he *is* all right?... That's such a relief....He what?... Yes. That's no problem. I'll be right over.... All right, and Doug?... Thank you." Hanging up the phone, I saw the concern on her face, "Is everything all right Zig Zag?" Looking at me she realized that I hadn't tracked the conversation, "That was Doug, James' business partner. He found James at home."

Standing up, reaching out to put my hand on her arm, I changed my mind and let it drop to my side, "Is he OK? Nothing happened to him did it?" Nodding she headed back towards the bedroom, "Yes, he's OK. Apparently he got drunk last night, smashed up his gun cabinet and then passed out in bed." A wave of relief washed over me. Turning into her room, she continued, "Doug wants me to come over and talk to him. Apparently James is convinced I never want to see him again." Turning away as she slipped out of

her housecoat, I heard her call, "Hey. Where you going?" As I hesitated, she chuckled, "It's your turn to watch, or did you forget?"

Smiling, I looked back at her as she pulled on some panties, "How can you joke at a time like this?" Turning, she walked towards me while pulling on a t-shirt, "James is going to be OK. Right now that's the most important thing. I feel like a weight has been lifted off my shoulders." Pulling on a pair of cut-offs, "You made me realize this morning that I was the one in the wrong." Sitting down to put on some sandals she continued, "I don't know about this insane story of yours, or the paranoid delusions of that Detective. But I owe you for this morning. For that reason alone I'm going to think about what you've said. In the meantime, I'm going to go over to James'."

Turning back to my bedroom, I walked in and grabbed a button down shirt. Putting it on strained the stitches some, but not as much as trying to do a pullover would have. Slipping my feet in the thongs, I spent a second pulling the covers up on the bed.

Walking to the door, I almost ran over Zig Zag as she stepped in, "Where do you think you're going mister?" I gave her a semi-neutral 'Duh' look. Shaking her head, she pointed to the bed, "Oh no you don't. You're getting back in bed." Cocking my head to one side, I asked, "Didn't we just have this conversation?" Crossing her arms, she took up a defiant stance in the doorway, "That was then, this is now. I'm not moving from this spot until you go back to bed." Thinking over my options, I decided on the least violent method, "The longer you stand there, the longer it will take to see James again."

Scowling, she made a decision, "If need be, there's no way you're going to get me out of this doorway short of violence unless you agree to go back to bed." Normally the look on her face would have struck a chord of fear, but this time I was determined to get my pound of flesh out of James. As we stood in a face-off for a few minutes, an answer suddenly occurred to me.

Turning the look on my face from neutral to a glare, I quickly took a step forward. Watching her eyes get wide, I grabbed her by the shoulders. Putting my right leg forward, I pivoted left while twisting her. Catching her with my left arm, I now had her almost parallel. As she grabbed my arms to keep from falling, I bent over and gave her a kiss similar to that of the one she hit me with this morning. Straightening up, I twisted her around and set her back in the doorway.

A shocked look on her face, she backed up against the opposite side of the hall. Stepping out, I smiled, "Where I come from, that's not considered violence." Watching her face go from shock to one of scorn, I heard her mutter, "Men." as I walked towards the garage.

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Tigger woke with a start. The buzzer was going off on the console. Looking over, she saw that her competitions car had left the two-mile limit. Looking at the time, she gave a little curse. 'Didn't this jerk ever sleep?' It was only nine o'clock. Setting the security system on standby, she rolled out of the hammock. Watching the display, she saw that he wasn't headed for any of the three target locations she expected. Zig Zag's house, Sheila's

apartment and the studio were his most likely target spots. If he wasn't headed there then where was he?

Grumbling to herself about idiots, she put on a quick change of clothes. Taking her general-purpose gym bag, she headed for the car. If this guy was just going out for a drink, she was going to cap his ass on general principles.

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I was beginning to gain a new respect for Mercedes Benz. Leaning the seat all the way back, I extended the headrest to the max. Relaxing, it wasn't too bad. Definitely no match for a good bed, but it was a decent substitute. Closing my eyes, I tried to relax while a tiny part my mind screamed out, 'Are you nuts! This woman was driving the car that hit you!' Fortunately I've had a lot of practice ignoring that particular voice.

Just about the time we were leaving the city proper, her cell phone rang. It was Wanda, "Hi Zigs, I just wanted to check up and see if you were going to be in today or not?" Opening my eyes, I gave a quiet "Oops." Grimacing, Zig Zag spoke to the microphone, "Unless there's something pressing, I don't think I'll be in this morning. Maybe not even all day." I could hear the hesitation in Wanda's voice, "Well... It's just that Bjorn is supposed to arrive in today." I could see Zig Zag grinding her teeth, trying to make up her mind about what to do.

Tapping her on the shoulder, I waved my finger no as she glanced to me. Rocking her head back and forth with indecision for a second she decided, "Wanda, call Sheila and see if she will pick up Bjorn for me. Have her drive him to the corporate apartment and make sure he's all setup there. She can reach me at James' afterwards." Closing the call out, she hung up the phone.

Letting out a sigh, she slumped against the wheel slightly, "This will be the first time I've ever sent someone else to pick up Bjorn. Do you have ANY idea how important this guy is to my productions?" Thinking for a second, I quipped, "Well, he did get me evicted from the apartment." Seeing her lips thin into a line, I aimed for a corrective action, "Not that being banished to Sheila's bed is that bad mind you." That got her; she actually smirked for a second, but returned to the scowl. Crossing my arms, I closed my eyes; "You're not going to let me off the hook are you?"

I could hear that she wasn't too serious, "You should be in bed. I didn't appreciate that stunt you pulled in the doorway." Time to change tactics, "Yah? Well just for your information, I wanted to verify something." I could hear her consternation, "Confirm what?"

Hoping that she didn't maul me again, I chuckled, "That your tongue tickled. I wasn't sure if it was my imagination or not."

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Standing at the gate, Sheila waited for the plane to unload its passengers. She had gotten a call from the office on the way home and changed destinations to meet him. It had been almost a year since she last worked with him and she couldn't wait to see the little otter again.



Watching the people disembark, she saw Bjorn as he exited, near the front of the line. Carrying a small bag, he looked exhausted. Once he exited the arch leading into the commons area, he looked around tiredly. Knowing that he was searching for Zig Zag and not her, Sheila maneuvered herself to come around behind him. Tapping on his shoulder she asked, "Hey sailor, looking for a little action?"

Turning to look at whoever spoke to him, he was transformed with delight at the sight of Sheila. In his thick, Scandinavian accent he declared, "Sheila! It is *wonderful* to be seeing you again. This is quite a surprise." Bending down to give him a hug, and a kiss, Sheila welcomed him appropriately, "It's good to see you again Bjorn. I've been looking forward to working with you." Striking a pose, he retorted, "What woman would not?"

Together they laughed at the old joke. Again looking around, Bjorn asked, "And where is the cuddly Zig Zag? She could not make it?" Her face turning serious, Sheila began to lead him over to the baggage claim, "She had to deal with a personal emergency. It's a very close friend. I'm sure you can understand that." Nodding, he gave Sheila a tired smile, "Ja, that I can. There is nothing else I know of that would keep her away."

Waiting for the luggage, she caught up on old times with Bjorn. Now that he had become a European movie star, they hardly ever had time to talk. After loading his luggage into her car, they began the drive back to the company apartment.

Relaxing back into the seat, Bjorn asked, "All we talk about is me. What is new with you? Certainly you have not been hiding in a hole for the last year." Smiling, she quietly broke the news, "I've been seeing someone Bjorn, someone special." Giving her a sly smile, he asked, "I must say, he is one lucky dog, this man of yours." Chuckling, she corrected him, "He's a bear. Polar bear to be precise." Feigning surprise, Bjorn laughed, "Ya, and you were the one who always said that size doesn't matter?"

Having a good laugh at that, Sheila filled Bjorn in on some of the happenings on their drive to the apartment. It was going to be a blast working with the guy. Who knows, maybe she'd talk Arden into a threesome. Thinking about it, she decided he probably wouldn't go for it. Then again, as Zig Zag always said, there's never any harm in asking.

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As we pulled into the driveway of James' house, I used the handle over the door to pull myself upright and reset the seatback. After Zig Zag parked the car, we climbed out and headed inside. Not bothering to ring the doorbell, Zig Zag opened the door and we went in, "Doug? James? Anyone home?"

I saw a female lion peek her head around the corner and smile, "Hello Zig Zag." Meeting us in the foyer, she walked over to me, "Hello, I'm Kelly, you must be Arden." Smiling, I took her paw, and bent low in a bow, "It's a pleasure to meet you Kelly." Kissing the back of her paw, I released it and straightened up. She almost cooed, "A real live gentleman. Better be careful, my husband might get jealous."

Getting a more serious look on her face, she turned to Zig Zag, "James is back in the master bedroom." Following Zig Zag and Kelly, I glanced into the various rooms as we passed by. James had a very nice setup. As we passed the study, I saw a mass of

destruction. Stepping inside, I carefully walked around the glass on the floor. Flip-flops aren't the best thing to wear around broken glass.

From what little bit was left on the wall, as well as the guns scattered around on the floor with the debris, I presumed that it must have been James' gun collection. Shaking my head, I tried to figure out what he had been thinking. Squatting down, I carefully began to sift the wreckage. As I picked up each weapon, I opened the action and verified that they were unloaded. Placing each weapon, still open, on the desk as I went.

"Excuse me, but what are you doing?" Turning towards the voice, I saw it belonged to a large Brown Bear or maybe a Kodiak that was standing in the door. Turning back, I picked up the next gun; "I'm making sure that he didn't have any of them loaded. Last thing we need is a loaded weapon laying around waiting for an excuse to go off." I heard him harrumph, then walk over and join me, "I presume you're Arden?" Placing the weapon I had just checked on the desk, I turned to him. Sticking out my hand, "Yah, I'm Arden. You must be Doug." Exchanging a firm handshake on both sides, we returned to the pile.

Lifting up some more wood, I tossed it to the side to get at more stuff under the rubble, "Man, this is one serious mess. What was he thinking?" Handing me an open weapon to put on the desk, Doug answered, "Apparently he got the idea that if he destroyed his gun collection, Zig Zag would take him back."

It started with a chuckle. Putting the revolver up on the desk, it became a laugh. After a few seconds, I found I had to sit down. Stumbling back against the far wall, I slumped down and sat on the floor, laughing so hard tears were running down my face. Every time I managed a breath, I got a look at Doug. He had absolutely no idea what was so funny.

Standing up, he walked over to me. Looking down with his arms on his hips, he scowled, "Would you mind telling me what's so damn funny?" Holding up a paw, I tried to get control. Unbuttoning my shirt I opened it. The look on his face changed from a glower to amazement. Squatting down in front of me, "What the heck happened to you?" Still chuckling, I explained, "I was having a talk with Zig Zag this morning about her argument with James. During the conversation... well... you can see what happened to me."

Giving a silent whistle, Doug pulled the shirttails away so that he could see the extent of the damage, "There's got to be at least thirty or forty stitches there." I was finally finished with my fit of hysterics, "More like fifty actually. I took a mauling to get James back in good graces with Zig Zag. He destroyed his display case for nothing." Sitting back on his heels, Doug glanced at the remaining destruction and smiled, "Yep. This isn't one of James' finer moments. I suppose I can see how that could be funny to you, though I don't think I'd be laughing."

Returning to the disaster, Doug continued to clean things up while I recovered. Still smiling, I checked for blood. I had been laughing so hard, that I swear I had to have pulled a stitch.

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Getting to the apartment, Sheila helped carry Bjorn's bags up to the apartment, and began to unpack them. Flopping on the bed, Bjorn let out a loud sigh, "This bed is far better than any airline seat." Jumping up, Sheila landed on her back besides Bjorn, causing him to bounce in the air momentarily. Giving a little giggle, she stretched out and closed her eyes, "You have no idea how much I could use a nap right about now."

Rolling over, Bjorn put his arm around Sheila, "Mama always say, if you want to sleep good, then have a roll in the hay to send you on the way." Squirring as he tickled her, Sheila let out a squeak, "Bjorn! She never said that!" Wrestling on the bed for a few minutes, Bjorn managed to pin her. Giving her a soft kiss, he looked down at her, "I have missed you."

Getting a sad look, Sheila rubbed her paws down his back, "I've missed you too Bjorn. You've been away too long." As he nipped the fur under her ears and down along her neck, Sheila tried to push him away, "Bjorn, please... I can't." Continuing his nipping, he whispered in her ear, "You said we would be working together, ja?" Torn by her desires, "Yes, but..." Moving his head to work on the other side of her neck, he whispered again, "Then he will understand the need to rehearse." Arching her back and began working his way along her collarbone, Sheila started to speak again, then gave up. Loosing herself in the moment, she wrapped her legs around him in an embrace.

After all, actors did have to rehearse, didn't they?

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Having followed her target out into the extremes of suburbia, Tigger tracked the roads he drove to his destination. Odds are that unless he was meeting someone, he would have driven by his target to verify their location. Casually cruising down the rural farm road, she spotted Zig Zag's Mercedes parked in a driveway. Her "ZZ" license plate was clearly visible. Checking the display on her laptop, she saw that he had circled around the farm to park on the road behind it. Zooming in, she saw a similar road beyond the trees opposite the front of the house. He would probably take his shot from the trees at the edge of the farm. She would have to get some height if she wanted a clear shot.

Accelerating away, she found a secluded place to pull off that was near the house. Parking the car behind some bushes, she made sure it wouldn't be spotted from the road. Taking a small backpack, she opened her rifle case and transferred the contents to the pack. Strapping on a climbing belt and spikes, Tigger hurried off to find a good thick tree to climb.

Frantically searching for a good location to snipe from, Tigger mentally castigated herself for not having found out about this place. It was sloppy work and sloppy work got one killed.

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After cleaning up the mess in the study, Doug and I joined everyone else in James' room. Zig Zag and Kelly were both trying to convince him to go to the hospital and get his foot looked at. Waving his hands, James gave an emphatic, "No. I'm not going to any doctor and that's it." Disgusted by this Zig Zag turned to look at Doug and I, "Just once I'd like to meet a man who's not too macho to go to a doctor when he's hurt!"

Sympathizing with James, I came over and knelt down to look at his foot. Trying to pull away, James protested, "Hey don't you start now." Straightening up, I gave him a good hard glare. As I did so, I saw his eyes open wide, "What happened to your chest?"

Looking down, I realized that I hadn't buttoned the shirt back up after talking to Doug. Glancing at Zig Zag, I saw a nervous look on her face. Smiling I turned back to James, "I have a bad habit of scratching when I sleep." Clearly not believing me, he once again tried to pull away as I examined the cut. Applying a little pressure to the tendon behind his ankle, I convinced him that discretion was the better part of valor. The cut wasn't really that deep, but it was over an inch long. Odds are it would tear while walking if left alone. Remembering a trick I learned from a friend, I asked the girls, "Do you know if there is any SuperGlue in the house?"

Looking between them, I saw they didn't have a clue. James piped up, "There's a tube of the stuff in the utensil drawer, in the kitchen by the sink." Hearing this, Kelly ran off to grab it. Taking the cloth and water they had used to clean up his foot, I verified there was no glass or other contaminates in the wound.

Returning with the tube, Kelly asked, "You aren't actually going to use this on his paw are you?" Taking the tube, I verified that it was a Cyano Acrylic Ester compound. Removing the tube, I pressed the wound together so that the skin lined up, "Yep. They're using a slight variant of this stuff as surgical glue now rather than stitches or staples. Only difference is that their compound is easier for the body to absorb. This stuff will have to chip off over time." Drawing a thin line on the inside edge of the bottom of the wound, I once again pressed the skin together, forming a thick straight scar. After counting to five, I let go. The wound held together perfectly. Capping the glue, I stood up, "I'd still keep it covered, and avoid walking on it, but for the most part, that should fix you up."

Checking the feel of the skin on his paw with his fingers, James nodded, "That's a neat trick. I'll have to remember that next time I cut myself in the woodshop." Handing the glue back to Kelly, "I wouldn't get too wild with this stuff. The other difference between this and surgical glue is that this is a Cyano Acrylic based compound. Use too much and it can have nasty side effects." That got his attention. Nodding, he re-evaluated his medical plan in the woodshop.

Surrendering to James's demand for privacy so he could get dressed, we walked down the hall towards the kitchen. Peering around my shirt, Kelly asked, "How did you really get those scars? I hadn't heard on the news." I was about to answer when Zig Zag spoke up, "I did that this morning." I saw Kelly shoot Doug a concerned look. Seeing that Zig Zag wasn't going to explain, I decided too, "She kept warning me not to pull her tail, but it's such an irresistible asset." Reaching out, I gave her tail a tug. "Hey!" she yipped, swatting at my hand. Smiling at Kelly, I saw that she didn't believe me for a moment.

As we entered the kitchen, Kelly volunteered, "Why don't you two go have a seat at the table while Doug and I fix some coffee?" I heard Doug start to say something, but the thump of Kelly kicking him prevented it. She probably wanted to talk to Doug about Zig

Zag. Putting my right arm out, I snaked it through Zig Zag's left. Looking up at me, she gave a weak smile. Waving my hand towards the breakfast table, "Shall we?"

Walking around the counter, we had just stepped in front of the large sliding glass door when I heard "*GET BACK*" being shouted in my head. Swinging my right arm out I pushed Zig Zag back as I reversed direction. No sooner than I had stopped our forward momentum, the sliding glass door exploded inwards. The door to the china cabinet against the wall buckled as a large caliber bullet passed through it. Turning my face away, I raised my arm to ward off the flying glass.

As we fell backwards against the counter, I pulled Zig Zag down and over towards the outside wall so whoever was outside wouldn't have a chance to spot her. Looking over I saw Doug and Kelly standing, shock written on their faces. Yelling at them, "Get down! Now!" My words penetrated Doug's brain, and he grabbed Kelly dragging her down to the ground. My heart pumping, I could feel my combat senses coming alive. I had heard the dragons warning, it had saved my life if not Zig Zag's.

Closing my eyes, I turned inwards and called on his strength, "For duty, for honor, as bear I ask for your strength, grant me power to defend." Hearing my call, I felt strength flow into me. Roaring, my body burned with the flow of energy as it was channeled into me. Feeling Zig Zag's touch on my arm, I turned to look at her. I could see her aura without trying and every strand of fur on her face was in perfect resolution. Giving a gasp, she crawled away from me. I could only imagine what she saw.

Closing my eyes once again, I stepped forth from my body. Laughing at all the times I had tried to do this before I changed, I reveled in the feeling of freedom and power. Things around me no longer had a true color, but were in shades of gray, though living things had an aura. Looking out at the tree line behind the farm, I spotted an aura that didn't belong. Focusing on him, my vision tunneled until it was as if he were before me. I saw he had a bolt-action rifle with a clip. Scanning the back of the house, he was looking for a target. Blinking, my vision returned to normal. I judged him to be a hundred or so meters down range.

Returning to my body, I reached down and removed the splint from my leg and stood. Taking a few deep breaths to help oxygenate my blood, I heard Doug asking what I thought I was doing. Ignoring all else, I prepared to let the rage take me.

Darting out the back of the house, I sprinted directly for my target. Concentrating on his position, I could see him swing the rifle around towards me. As he lined up his shot, I dodged to the side causing his shot to go wild. Now running in an erratic pattern, I dodged two more shots before he dropped the rifle and stood up. Now only thirty or so meters away, I saw him bring out a revolver. Aiming it at me, he began firing off rounds. Trying to evade his fire, I was knocked off balance as one of the shots struck me in the shoulder. Rolling through the fall, I came back up on my feet and charged again trying to regain my momentum.

This time, holding his fire, he waited until there was no chance of missing me. As I prepared for the pain of his shot I saw his head explode. Stumbling to a stop, I heard the

report of a cannon from my left. Looking down at the corpse, I realized that James must have gotten to one of his rifles.

Turning back to the house, I looked at the windows, and realized that they all were still closed. If James hadn't shot him, who did? Stepping behind the tree he had been laying beside, I scanned the tree line in the other direction. On my third pass, I spotted something high up in a tree.

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Tigger had finally found a tree that would suit her purposes. Digging in her claws and the climbing spikes, she shimmied up the tree. She heard the first shot when she was about half way up. Cursing, she continued her climb to the crook in the tree limbs she had planned on using for a platform.

Leaning back against her climbing belt, she slipped the pack off and placed it in the crook of the limbs. With practiced speed and precision, she assembled the rifle and attached the scope. Slamming the clip home, she chambered a round and settled the rifle on the limb. Using the scope, she scanned the house, looking for signs of life. As she was about to move on to the outer tree line, she spotted the bear charging from the house, 'What the hell does he think he's doing? That idiot's charging a trained assassin empty handed across an open field. The fool deserves to die.'

Seeing the general direction he was running, Tigger panned over to the edge of the field and scanned. Spotting her competition, she watched as he frantically fired at his prey. Taking her eyes from the scope, she saw that the bear was dodging in an erratic fashion, dodging the shots. Returning to the scope, she saw him stand and draw a large caliber automatic weapon. Widening the field of view on her scope, she saw him fire off half a dozen rounds at the bear, finally clipping him in the shoulder. As she watched, the bear dove in the direction he was falling and managed to come out of it on his feet. Again charging his attacker, she saw her competition calm down and take careful aim.

Swinging the cross hairs back over to the gunman, she zoomed in his head. Placing them squarely below his temple, she squeezed the trigger. Her target exploded with the force of the round as it penetrated.

Zooming out, she watched the bear as he stumbled to a stop a few feet from the body. Turning back to the house, she saw him looking to see who had fired the shot. Confusion wiped the look of relief off his face just before he quickly stepped behind a tree. Cautiously, he poked his head out and scanned the tree line. Zooming in to maximum magnification, his face filled her scope.

As she watched, she suddenly became aware of his eyes. The picture she had been shown had normal, round gray irises. The eyes before her now were black slits, set within a yellow ring on a red background.

Blinking her eyes, she became aware of the fact he was staring at her. He had spotted her behind the tree. At this distance, it should be impossible. Stepping out into the open, he glared at her defiantly. As she watched, he mouthed the words 'Go ahead, shoot.' Swallowing, Tigger worked the action on the bolt. Placing the crosshairs squarely in the

middle of the bridge of his snout, her finger started to tighten on the trigger. Watching, she saw his eyes narrow as her finger began to compress the trigger. 'How the hell can he see what I'm doing?'

A sudden realization came to her. She was afraid. Something was very wrong here. He had seen her take out a man with one shot, yet stood there challenging her to shoot at him. Taking her finger off the trigger, she saw him smile. She wondered if the DA had any idea what he was up against. Removing the scope from the rifle, she laid the rifle between the tree limbs. Using the scope to watch him, she gave him a casual salute. Smiling, he put his hand over his chest, and gave a small nod.

Her eyes drawn to the motion of his hand, she saw not only the bullet hole from his attacker, but also that his chest was crisscrossed with stitches. Even with all that, done to him, he still had the strength to charge.

Smiling, she began to pack her equipment away. This was going to be more entertaining than she thought. If that guy was half as tough as he acted, he just might be the one mauling the DA for her.

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Watching her disassemble the rifle, I waited until she began down the tree before taking my eyes off of her. She had decided not to try to kill me. That left the question, was she an ally or enemy? Once she was safely out of sight, I squatted down by the assassin. A quick check of his equipment showed nothing special. He did have a nice looking combat knife. Taking it out, I examined my eyes in its reflection. They had most certainly been changed. Rather than the familiar round pupils, these were slit shaped with yellow irises on a field of crimson. No wonder Zig Zag freaked out.

Sticking the knife in the dirt next to the body, I continued searching it. Only other thing he had was a nice pair of Rayban Sunglasses. Reaching within, I began to release the energy. "Not yet. You have not yet healed." It was the voice of the dragon, "But Dragon does not have healing powers." I heard it chuckle, "But Dragon is eternal and can regenerate."

Opening my eyes, I reached up to where the slug had hit my shoulder. It was a grazing wound. Peeling back the shirt, I could almost see the healing process. In a matter of hours I would be healed. Looking at the stitches on my chest, I saw no such effect with the damage there. There was obviously some statue of limitations for wounds.

Taking the sunglasses, I put them on. That would keep the others from wiggling out. It may not help with Zig Zag, but that's life. Heading back towards the house, I saw Doug and James on the back porch, each with a pistol in hand. Waving them off as I approached, "He's dead." Relaxing a little, James asked, "I heard different rifle fire when he went down. Any idea what that was?" Nodding, I sat down on the edge of the porch, "It appears I have a guardian angle. There was someone up in the trees on the far side of the road. They took out the guy when I got close."

James came around in front of me, "Are you crazy? How do you know that wasn't just another assassin?" Shrugging, "I didn't, but I gave them plenty of opportunity to shoot

me. Before climbing down, they waved. I don't know about you, but that sounds more like an ally than an enemy." Shaking his head, James pronounced, "You are crazy. Certifiably insane, you know that? Do you have ANY idea how dangerous that stunt was? You're lucky that guy didn't shoot you." Pointing to the blood on the shoulder, "No, I'm lucky he didn't shoot any better. He did scratch me though."

Turning to Zig Zag, James threw his arms up in the air, "I surrender. I give up. This is too much for me. He's your friend, you deal with him." I felt the rage building, but knew to fight it. I had no intention of killing him now that I had just gotten him and Zigs back together.

Leaning back against the post that supports the awning, I closed my eyes and tried to rest. There would be the cops to deal with, and the media. James' refuge was about to become a circus.

A couple of minutes after I had gotten comfortable, I heard someone come down the steps and walk over to me. Sitting on the edge of the porch next to me, I could smell Zig Zag. Opening my eyes, I turned my head towards her, "So, am I too much of a maniac for James? Is it a 'him or me' decision now?" Shaking her head no, she just stared at me. Reaching up, she pulled the sunglasses off of my face, "What are you?" Giving a sigh of exasperation, I gave her a pained look, "I've told you what I am. You just don't want to believe it."

Looking down, she began twisting the bottom of her t-shirt in between her fingers. It's no wonder she's always wearing ragged looking shirts. "I don't know. Everything's been so crazy since you showed up. It's almost been one thing after another. As soon as I think we're over the hump something else happens to make me feel like I'm losing it." Laughing, I watched her shoot me an angry glance, "Lady, you don't have a clue. I think I've got the market cornered right now for weirdness."

Reaching down, I picked up the sunglasses and put them on, "How would you like to wake up one day with no fur, no tail, and an extra digit on each hand and foot. Your ears down around the side of your head and your snout pushed back flat with your face?" Hugging herself, she shuddered, "That sounds absolutely horrible." Smiling, "It's how I spent the first 40 years of my life." I could hear the confusion, "Huh? But the hospital said you were in your early twenties." Nodding, "That's the only redeeming feature I can think of. It makes you young again." She chuckled, "That certainly does sound appealing."

Shaking my head, I tried to explain, "But at what cost? You'll never see your friends or loved ones again. You can never return to where you started. All that you were and all that you knew is now gone." Taking a deep breath to control my emotions, I continued, "My counterpart in this world had lost all his family. Where I came from, my brothers were still alive. So was my mother. Only my father had died, and that was just a few months ago. I'll never be able to walk up to my old friends and say 'Hey, wazup?' or pick up a phone and call someone just to hear their voice." Wiping a tear, "No. It may sound appealing, but the price is way too high for me. I finally understand why philosophers call immortality a curse."



## Chapter 33

Trying to push the memories of my old life out of my head, I fought with my emotions, knowing that once again I would have to give all up.

Honor and duty, they always came with a price. Why did it have to be me that paid?

God I miss my family.

# Chapter 34

One betrayal doesn't deserve another,

I was in New Zealand. My position on the ridge gave me an unobstructed view of the road that ran along the mountain for close to two miles. I had been camped there for almost four hours waiting for my target. A very powerful Japanese industrialist was selling state secrets to an outside agency. That was unacceptable. My mission was to eliminate the threat. A blowout of his tire on a winding road and he would be eliminated without any trace an outside agency.

A burst of static in my ear let me know my target was coming. Sending back two clicks, I uncovered the scope on my rifle. The Beretta .50 caliber sniper rifle easily had a range that would cover the entire section of road that was visible.

Settling myself in behind the scope, I thumbed the zoom function on the Fujitsu Optics scope and examined the passenger in the vehicle. Tracking the windshield, I recognized the face. Speaking into my microphone, "Target confirmed." Tracking the front wheel, I let the laser range finder give me predicted targets intersect point. A voice over my radio confirmed, "Slingshot, confirmation received. Proceed."

Controlling my breath I waited for the vehicle to approach the next left hand curve. The loss of the tire would send it over the edge, plummeting almost six hundred feet. Odds are they would never find the vehicle in the dense jungle below. Slowly squeezing the trigger so as not to jerk the rifle, I froze.

There were children in the car. "Control, target has thirds." Watching as the two children looked out the passenger windows at the scenery below, I heard control, "Acknowledged. Proceed with action."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. They wanted me to off the guy *and* his kids! "Control, repeat, minors in target, aborting." Immediately I got an angry response, "Slingshot, proceed with action." Still tracking the car, I once again prepared to take the shot. Trying to squeeze the trigger, I found I couldn't do it. "Control. Crossbow is aborting. End contact." Ignoring the voice in my ear, I turned off the radio.

Policing my camp area, I verified there was no trace of me left behind. I'd catch hell for aborting the kill, but I didn't care. I was sick of this job. I'd turn in my resignation when and if I saw Togusa.

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I woke up to the sound of the front door closing. I begged off after giving a brief statement to the cops. From the lack of voices, I presumed that the police were done with their investigation. Sitting up, I let out a groan. Every muscle in my body hurt. Standing up, I moved to the open space near the hallway. Doing some basic stretches, I managed to get the worst of the kinks out of my muscles. Working my way to the kitchen, I found everyone sitting at the dining table.

Leaning against the doorframe, I paused to catch my breath. I was exhausted. That bloody dragon never told me that coming down after using his powers would totally tap me physically.

Kelly looked up and spotted me, "Arden? Are you ok?" Shaking my head, I walked over to an empty chair and sat heavily down, "Oh man. I feel like death warmed over." Getting up from the table, Zig Zag walked towards the kitchen, "Would you like some coffee or anything?" Thinking about it, I decided to stay simple, "How about some ice water." While she was getting the drink, I put my arms on the table and propped my head on it.

Hearing Zig Zag set the glass down on the table I sat up straight. Taking a drink, I realized how thirsty I had been. Relaxing back in the chair, I look at everyone at the table. There was a pregnant pause in the conversation since I had gotten here.

Putting the glass down, I offered, "If I make you guys uncomfortable, I'd be glad to go sit out back or something. Don't let me ruin your conversation." Starting to get up, I was interrupted by Zig Zag, "No. Please. Sit down." Half standing I looked at the other three. Glancing amongst themselves, they finally nodded.

Sitting back down, I crossed my arms, "So?" Glancing amongst each other again, Doug decided he'd break the ice, "We've been discussing you." Giving a chuckle, I smiled, "Like I couldn't figure that out when I slaughtered the conversation with my appearance?" I've never seen a bear look sheepish. Then again, I've never met another bear before.

James spoke up, "We've been talking specifically about what happened this afternoon." Looking at Zig Zag, I asked, "Hasn't Zig been able to enlighten you?" James shook his head, "No. She was as surprised by what happened today as we were." So she didn't spill the beans about me. I'd kiss her if I didn't think James would go berserk.

Looking at each one of them, I tried to decide how much I trusted them. If Zig Zag hadn't sung about me, then I didn't see any reason to do so unless they cornered me, "Look, if you have questions, ask them. I'll try to explain what I can, but I still have a lot missing from my memory." Glancing at Zig Zag, I saw her close her eyes, and hang her head for a moment. She knew I was lying, not only to Doug and Kelly, but to James also. She was going along with the charade.

Doug was first to ask, "How did you know about the attack? I saw you stop Zig Zag from crossing in front of the door." Oh yah, just give me an easy one, "Tell me Doug, how much do you know of Totemic religions?" Watching him shake his head, I continued, "Totemic beliefs work on the principle that there are spirits who reside in an elemental plain that exists in tandem with the world as we know it. Each spirit represents a series of attributes. Example would be the bear, which represents healing, strength, protection and introspection. Mouse represents detail and meticulousness. Hawk is the messenger. Dragon... Dragon is the guardian. He represents honor, and duty, as well as change."

Looking around, I saw that they got the idea, but didn't really see where I was going. "My religion is totemic. I follow the path of the Dragon. What you saw and heard today was my calling upon the power of the dragon. I don't know if maybe it's some genetic deviation, or who knows maybe there really is a dragon in my family tree. All I know is that in times of extreme stress, I can call on strengths that would otherwise not be

available to me. A side effect is my eyes. I have no clue how it happens, or why. It just does."

Undaunted, he asked again, "That doesn't explain the attack. How did you know the sniper was going to shoot?" OK, so the diversion didn't quite work, "Would you believe that my spirit guide warned me?" I shrugged, "I just heard a voice in the back of my mind that yelled 'go back'. I reacted to it instinctively. Maybe my subconscious spotted a reflection, or maybe I saw dot from a laser. I can't explain it. I just accept it."

Shaking his head Doug asked, "Why did you charge the sniper. It was absolutely insane." Nodding, I agreed, "You're right. If I had been in my right mind, I wouldn't have done it. When I'm in that state, I.... lose some of myself to the animal side of my being. There is no cognizant thought. Just a need to find and destroy whatever is threatening me. The drive becomes uncontrollable when others close to me are involved. It happened the night that Sheila and I were attacked in the bedroom. I had no control with the first attacker. After he was dead, I regained control."

James was rubbing the bridge of his snout, "That's the most bizarre load of crap I've ever heard." Zig Zag glared at him and smacked his arm. Giving her a "What did I do?" look, "I'm sorry, but that's my opinion." Turning to me he continued, "From the day she hit you, you've been nothing but trouble for us, everything from drive by shootings, to snipers shooting up my house. You are nothing but trouble." Nodding, I agreed, "You're right. Every time something's happened, I've told Zig Zag I don't want to risk her or anyone around her, especially not Sheila. Every time, she's insisted that I stay and work it out. Besides, not everything that's happened has been bad."

Leaning back, he raised his hands to me, "Name one thing you've done that hasn't caused problems for the rest of us." Opening my shirt, I made sure he could see the scars, "I took fifty stitches from Zig Zag to make sure that she would come back to you. I'm the one that helped her work through her problem with firearms so that she would hopefully not destroy her relationship with you. I'm the reason she even called Doug this morning to make sure you were all right." Looking at Zig Zag, I nodded, "Ask her, I literally lifted her up by the scruff of her neck and tossed her out of the bathroom after she mauled me and told her not to talk to me again until she called you."

James looked at Zig Zag who nodded to him, "He's right. I was still upset at you for bringing guns into my house, but even more upset at myself for screaming at you like I did. He helped me see why I was so angry." Lowering her head, she continued quietly, "And in the process, I mauled him."

Looking around the table, I could see that her testimony had gone far in building my credibility. Redirecting their attention, I once again walked the path of the Bear, "Yah, I know I've been the cause of a lot of problems. But I've also helped. Last I checked, Zig Zag's public approval rating was above 50% for the first time since she went into business. We're looking at adding a new dimension to blue films with technology that Zig Zag hadn't even imagined would be available to her, much less thought of implementing. I'm not saying that I'm an angel. I've killed with my bare hands, no pun intended. I've had arguments, I've yelled and even hit people in anger, though I fight myself everyday to

control that side of me. I'm not asking for anything special, just a chance to prove that I'm not the bad guy."

Finishing off the ice water, I looked around at the faces and saw they were thinking over what I was saying. There was that damned pregnant pause again. Standing up, I thanked Zig Zag for the drink and excused myself. I was still exhausted and sore from this afternoon and needed some more sleep.

Settling in on the couch, I considered my options. Unfortunately for me, my only hope resided in Zig Zag defending me if the jury voted me down.

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Sitting in the hammock, Tigger checked the display on her monitoring equipment. Zig Zag's car was still located at (checking her notes), yes, James Sheppard's house. How interesting to find that she had a boyfriend. It was most entertaining. What was most intriguing was the fact that the cops were discrete enough keep the media out of it. Not one single reference to ZZ in their radio conversations. That was unusual.

Reaching over to her keyboard, she hit a separate function key and watched the map scroll over to watch Jones. The cat was at the city archives. Her investigations had shown that he was digging into the plea bargain agreements that the DA had signed off on, checking to see who, if any, he had overridden and given a more lenient plea.

Hitting the next function key, she brought up the location of Khansman's car. He was at the office as usual. The rube was stupid enough that he didn't even bother to have his car swept for bugs. Tonight she'd have to see about wiring his office.

She was rooting for the cop. If he pulled this off, the DA was going to be up the creek with out a paddle. Even if he did survive the rapids that were Jones, he'd have to deal with the waterfall, and that was her job.

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I really wish people would stop shaking me. Cracking open my eyes, I saw Zig Zag, "You have no idea how lucky James is." Watching her eyebrows rise, forming a question mark, I answered the implied question, "If it had been him, I would have been tempted to maul first and ask questions later." Giving me a little grimace, she nodded towards the door, "Let's roll out of here. It's getting late."

Sitting up, I saw that it was dark outside. I had been asleep most of the day. Accepting a hand up from Zig Zag, I followed her over to the front door. James was standing in the foyer. Giving Zig Zag a hug and a kiss, they whispered sweet, sucrose-encrusted words that would have sent a diabetic into shock.

Finally breaking it up, Zig Zag opened the door. Following her out, James stopped me as he put a hand on my arm. Looking at the hand, then his face, I tried to keep a neutral expression on my face. Glancing at Zig Zag, he looked back at me, "You're a trouble maker. But you're Zig's troublemaker. As long as she says so, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt." Nodding, I turned to leave when he stopped me again, "I also wanted to thank you." Turning back, I looked at him as he struggled to get what he needed to say out;

"You saved Zig's life today. I don't care about any totem mumbo jumbo crap, but I am not an ungrateful person, even if I can be dense. I just wanted to thank you."

Nodding, I asked, "Fresh start?" Giving me a confused look for a second, he thought and then nodded, "All right. Fresh start." Sticking my hand out, "Hi, I'm Arden, you must be James. I've heard some wonderful things about you from Zig Zag." Taking my hand, he shook it firmly, "Glad to meet you Arden, I've heard some pretty good things about you too."

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After Zig Zag parked the car in the garage, I stopped her before she went in. "Zig. I'd just like to say thanks." Cocking her head to the side, she gave me a curious look. "You could have really screwed me over today. Instead, you sat there and let me feed a line of disinformation to your friends." Giving me a shrug, she asked, "What else could I have done?" Leaning against the door, I started counting items off, "You could have told them what I told you this morning, that I'm lying about my memory, hell you could have told them I'm some kind of freak that escaped from a genetics lab." Running out of fingers, I decided to stop there, "As it was, you not only didn't make me out to be some freak, but you backed me up with James. That means a lot to me. I just wanted you to know."

Smiling, she reached up and grabbed an ear. Pulling me down, she got me to face level, "After all you've done for Sheila, the studio and myself there's no way I'd do any of that."

As she started to pull me forward, I put my hand up to stop her. Searching my eyes, she gave me a questioning look. "Zig, you're James' girl. I don't think he'd appreciate it." Rolling her eyes to the heavens, she used her other hand to push mine down, "Look, it's not like I'm taking you to bed, it's just a kiss." Giving a sigh of exasperation, I glanced down, "Yah, that may be true, but tell that to Mr. Happy. You're a temptation I don't want to *have* to resist Zig. Not after making up with James."

Nodding she closed her eyes and shook her head for a second, then reaching up with the other hand grabbed my other ear and yanked me close. Giving me a long hard kiss, she finally let go. "That's how I say thank you." Glancing down at the bulge in my crotch, she smiled, "And tell Mr. Happy to live with it."

Following her into the house, I heard her say, "I've still got it."

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Getting undressed, I heard Sheila in the shower. I was in a mood for a little water fun thanks to Zig's kiss. Opening the shower door, I stepped in and closed it behind me. Sheila jumped at the sound and spun around. Giving her a big smile, I opened my arms, "Hey baby. Daddy's home."

She just stood there, with her head down, not saying a word. Confused at this lack of enthusiasm, I reached out to lift her chin. Flinching away, she backed up. Dropping my arm to the side, I could feel the rage start. Stamping a hard fist on the feeling, I asked rather tersely, "What the hell's wrong now? I forget to call? Did I leave the bed turned back wrong? What?" In a weak voice, she still didn't look up, "It's not you, it's me."

Reaching over, I turned off the shower and grabbed her chin. Not giving her a chance to flinch, I lifted up her chin and demanded, "Look at me. I said LOOK AT ME!" Opening her eyes, she finally looked at me. "What is so damned horrible, that you're skulking in here refusing to even look at me?" Letting go of her chin, I leaned against the tile and waited.

"You know I was supposed to pick up Bjorn today right?" Know? Hell I was the one that kept Zig from doing it herself, "Yes, I was in the car when Zig made the call." Still refusing to look at me, "Bjorn and I go back a long ways. We've worked together on a lot of projects." I knew this, nodding I waited for her to continue. "We also spent a lot of time off camera too," she said looking up, searching my face for a reaction.

Turing, I closed my eyes and banged my head against the tile a few times, "Let me guess. He got you all hot and bothered today and wound up sleeping with him?" Touching my arm, she pleaded, "I know it was wrong. I wanted to stop him, but...." Pulling her hand back she started crying, "But he's just so.... I tried to justify it to myself as rehearsing for the screen, and that worked at the time, but now it doesn't cut it."

Taking a deep breath, I forced the rage down. She had betrayed me again. I could feel my claws punching holes in my palms. Repeating the litany over and over, I told myself, "I walk the path of bear. I am the healer. I can do no harm." Sheila saw the struggle, and interpreted it to be anger at her, and she was partially right. Trying to move past me and exit the shower, I blocked her with my body.

Having stifled most of the rage, I turned to her. Reaching out, I took her into my arms and held her close. Towering over her, I spoke quietly, "I won't say that I'm not upset at you. I won't promise not to have words with Bjorn. However, I do want you to realize that although I'm upset with you, and very disappointed with you, I still love you."

Smiling, I had an idea, "There's only one way I can think of, for you to make this up to me." Looking up at me with those sensuous eyes, "Anything. Just name it," she promised. Giving her a long, deep kiss, I felt the tension flow out of her. Breaking it off, I whispered in her ear, "Just tell me I'm better in bed than he is."

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Rolling over in bed, Sheila slowly became aware that Arden was missing. Glancing over at the bathroom, she confirmed that he wasn't there. Looking at the clock, she saw that it was almost four in the morning. Waking up without him in bed was getting to be a habit.

Climbing out of bed, she wrapped her housecoat around her and walked out into the hall. She saw the light on in Zig Zag's study and crept over. Peeking around the doorjamb she looked in and saw Arden writing in a small diary. As she watched, she saw him intensely concentrating on whatever he was writing. Leaning in the door, she smiled as he scratched his ear with the back end of the pen. She had seen Zig Zag doing the same thing in her office numerous times.

Clearing her throat she got his attention, "What are you writing about?" Looking up, he smiled, "The doctor told me that I should write down what's happened since I got the amulet. He was hoping it would provide some insight on what's happened to me."

## Chapter 34

Coming around the desk, she saw him close the book. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she nuzzled his ear, "How about putting the book away and coming to bed." Turning his head, he gave her a quick kiss, "Aren't you supposed to be doing a shoot today?" She nodded, "Yep, We're shooting all the bedroom scenes while the prop guys build the other sets." Giving a laugh, Arden stood up and followed her to bed, "If you have this much energy after you get home from work, then I'm definitely going to be in trouble if you ever retire."



# Chapter 35

Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

Sheila had just gotten out of the shower. Looking around, she couldn't spot Arden in the house anywhere. Seeing Zig Zag she asked, "Hey Zigs, have you seen Arden?" Looking up from the morning newspaper, Zig Zag nodded towards the back door, "He's out there doing laps. I've seen bears swim before, but never like that."

Thanking her, Sheila watched the pool through the window for a few minutes. She watched as he lost himself in the simple yet elegant act of swimming. She had seen others do the same thing while running. They entered their own little private world where they could think about life without the distractions of things around them. Smiling, she walked back to the bedroom to get dressed for the day.

After getting dressed, Sheila straightened up the bed, folding the covers up over the pillows. Finished, she noticed that the drawer by the bed wasn't completely closed. Opening it, she saw the diary that Arden had been writing in.

Flipping it open, she read the first page.

The Doc said that I should start at the beginning and relate the events as they happened to me. I guess that kind of makes sense. Even now I'm still not sure if this is real, a dream or a nightmare. Allow me to introduce myself. I'm Arden, as in the forest over in Germany. When all this started, I was a 38-year-old networking specialist who enjoyed spending his spare time riding his motorcycle, checking out the movies, and reading. Always reading. I stood a solid 6'1", weighed about 350lbs and enjoyed lifting weights.

Mind you, I'm not one of these guys that are body builders; I just do it as a casual workout to keep fit. It's hard to work up a good sweat when one's sitting in front of a computer all the time. To round out my face, I wore large, round glasses that helped take a little bit of the chubbiness out of my face. Nice hazel green eyes, and brown crew-cut hair and a full beard rounded out the picture. The only drawback was that I'm an introvert.

An introvert? Arden? That was a good one. Flipping pages, she saw other notes he had made. She read about his conversation with Zig Zag in the hospital, how he had toyed with the two traffic cops who had come to interview him after the accident, and their first meeting. He had been devastated by her reaction, and rightly so. The poor guy thought that all was lost. Thank goodness Philippe had a long snout.

Skipping several pages she read about his first attempt to use the bathroom, laughing at his having to 'learn the rudiments of fur care.' She could understand his problem; it was something every young cub learned early. The poor guy had to learn it late in life.

Again flipping, she read his account of the drive by shooting. He had lived in neighborhoods where this kind of stuff was commonplace. Further in she read his account of their first shower, and their conversation afterwards. Then she spotted his monolog.

At this point I sat down on the bed and thought about what I was doing. What's my problem? I know I'm squeaky, but good lord, I've had the hots for her ever since I saw her. Now that I'm here, I've been

## Chapter 35

resisting her every move. Looking at Sheila, I could see that she was watching me closely, trying to see what I was thinking. Running my right hand, paw, through my fur on the top of my hair, I was reminded just how different I had become as my ear brushed my arm. Looking over at her dressing table, I saw myself again, as if for the first time. I had really changed. This had been going on too long, and hurt too much to be a dream. I needed to spend some time deciding just how I was going to handle this. I was going to have to decide if I'd become a recluse again, or loosen up.

She remembered his kiss. It was their first, real kiss, and to her chagrin the fact that she had petulantly resisted him because of the promise he had made her make before the shower.

Flipping a couple more pages, she read about his nightmare. He had been a storm chaser, the kind of person who lived for the hunt, looking for the most dangerous of all things, Tornados. How he had gone out in search of his love and wound up killing her through a freak accident of nature. The accident reminded her of the night Zig Zag had hit him. Stifling a tear, she continued to flip through.

Skipping a large section she came to the night James had given Arden the guns, the time at the gun range, and finally his talk with Zig Zag and why he had wound up singing her to sleep that morning. She read about their argument when he hit her, and the turmoil that it caused within him. Then she read about his meeting with the dragon.

Getting a better grip on myself, I sat up, crossing my legs in front of myself. "I take it then, that I'm back in the spirit realm. If so, why you? Why am I not with Nanuk?" I felt the air flowing from behind me as it began to breathe in, "Bear no longer has sufficient power to bring you to her. By bringing your woman across the barriers this morning to save your life, she used the last of her remaining power. Even then, the dragon of that realm had to help her return. She now rests, trying to regain power for the next stage."

Her actions had caused more than just harm to Arden; it had caused Nanuk to expend energy she couldn't afford to lose. Reading on, she saw how the dragon spirit had adopted him to walk its path, explaining his sudden burst of rage. He hadn't known to guard against it. Thinking about his struggle in the shower last night, Sheila realized that he could very well have mauled her if he had lost control. Reading on.

Nodding I understood, "I understand, but you said I had a mission. What is this mission." I got a feeling of immense satisfaction from the dragon, "Duty and Honor, these too are traits of Dragon. Bear chose well for us. You must go to the realm of the Sorcerer Ruddygore and obtain the Lamp of Lakesh from him."

Wait a minute... If he had to go to another realm, that means he'd have to leave her. Reading on, she saw how if he did this, Nanuk would be renewed, but at a cost to him. He'd have to give her up. He'd have to leave. On the next page over, she saw a poem.

My light, my life, my love,

## Chapter 35

How could I do this to you?  
Pulled from the beyond the vale,  
All I could hope for came true.

You're touch, you're warmth, your smell,  
These things were but a dream to me,  
Embodied anew, you have restored my soul,  
This truth is all that exists for me.

As I walk the path set before me,  
By my side, I envision you,  
Constant companion and friend,  
My way would be lost without you.

As bear, as dragon, as man,  
One thing always remains the same,  
The light that has sustained me,  
I pray never to cause you pain.

I would live or die at your word,  
I would kill or spare at your whim,  
I would guard you from all harm,  
I pray I can protect you from within.

My destiny has now been shown,  
To save my spirit I must now decide,  
A choice I must make is now known,  
Do I condemn another or sacrifice?

A promise is made but duty calls,  
My soul in transition, my way is lost,  
This decision, I know not how to make,  
It is a bridge that I am forced to cross.

To stay will bring death, darkness and pain,  
Leaving will destroy all that I am,  
This conundrum is beyond all I know,  
I fear that my time with you has come to an end.

My light, my life, my love,  
How could I do this to you?  
Pulled from the beyond the vale,  
All I could hope for now is through.

Sheila was shaking. He was being forced to decide between her, and his spirit, his soul. How can anyone be asked to make a decision like that? Then there was the big question, could she let him go when the time came? Closing the book, she sat, softly crying.

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Standing in the doorway, I watched her reading my journal and the emotions that played across her face, happiness, sadness, and amusement. I could have stopped her before she got to the end, but did I have the right? She needed to know, and I had been unable to find a way to tell her. Maybe this was the best way. As I watched, I heard her read the poem, then close the book and quietly begin to cry. With each soft sound, a sharp pain

pierced my soul. Walking over the wall opposite the bed, I slid down to sit, leaning against it.

Looking at me, she held up the book, "Is this true?" Breaking my eyes from her gaze, I looked down at my paws and nodded. "And will you do this?" Giving a shrug, I tried to find an answer, "I don't know yet." Moving to kneel before me, she put her face by mine, "And how can you not? What about 'Honor and Duty'? Don't these mean anything to you?" Looking up at her, I felt only numbness, "Those are the way of the Dragon. Though I am forced along it's path, I am still bear, and yet by that declaration I again doom myself. I'm holding onto two ropes, suspended between them, pulled apart by them, being ripped in two, you and my spirit. I must release one, but which?"

Dropping the book in my lap, she stood, "I can't make this decision for you. It can be only yours. I don't know if it's destiny, or maybe something else. All I know is that you have to do what you feel is right. If that means leaving me.... then I won't stop you."

I watched her go into the bathroom to finish getting ready for work. Looking down at my palm, I once again looked at Lakesh. The edge of the symbol was tattooed with the holes I caused last night in the shower. I wondered how he felt, knowing that he was going to help save the good guys.

# Chapter 36<

Oh my god! They killed Sabrina! You bastards!.

Sabrina had just finished up going over the prints that came in this morning. Sitting back, she thought about what to work on next, when she remembered the archivist at the University Library. Taking out his card, she gave him a call.

Jacobs: "Hello?"

Sabrina: "Hello. This is Sabrina. I came to see you yesterday with some photocopies?"

Jacobs: "Oh yes, the pretty young girl and her wonderful pictures. Most interesting, yes."

Sabrina: "Were you able to figure anything out about them yet?"

Jacobs: "Yes, I was, yes, yes. I did some research on the front of the amulet. It refers to a Demon named 'Lakesh'. Now I say Demon as that's the most common translation, though I found an obscure reference to the symbol as being a Dragon, though I'm not sure if that's a translation error by the author, or an actual reference.'

A Demon eh? Well the face certainly didn't look like any Dragon Sabrina had ever seen, though she filed the fact away for future reference.

Sabrina: "Was there anything else you could find out?"

Jacobs: "Yes, the text on the back appeared to describe different people. It is strange how the text spirals out from the center, getting smaller towards the edge. It's something I've never seen before, almost as if it were chronicling a history or some kind of lineage, very interesting indeed. Were you able to talk to your friend about the originals?"

Sabrina: "No. I haven't had a chance to today. However I will ask her as she is working today. Thank you very much. Please let me know if you find anything else out."

Jacobs: "Certainly. Of course, it would help if I had your number."

DOH. She had gotten his card, but not given him hers. Giving him her work number, she rang off and then realized what she had done, 'Oh no. He's going to think I'm a performer here.' Giving herself a grimace, she tried to ignore the heat rising from her face and put it out of her mind. With Bjorn in town, she'd be busy doing the art for his work so he could approve it before leaving and she needed to get hopping.

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Cleaning up the table after having worked over Leon, I got ready for whoever would be next. Clarence was in charge of the schedule. It really was a pain trying to write stuff down in a schedule book with oily hands. Fortunately that kid was pretty bright and not a bad organizer.

Turning as someone came in, I saw my next victim... er... customer was going to be Bjorn. I had gotten a chance to meet him as he and Sheila left for lunch. I had bowed out from the event. I'd give her some room. I had no right to get in the way of her happiness if I was going to be leaving in the near future.

Giving him a hand, up on the table, I got out some oils, "So, I understand you and Sheila go back a long way." Nodding his head slightly against the rest, he confirmed, "Ja. We have been performing for several years. She is one of my favorite actresses." Starting to

work on his shoulders, I rubbed the oils into the fur, "Glad to hear it. It explains what happened yesterday at your apartment."

As what I said sank in, he tried to roll away. Pushing down, I pinned him to the table, "We aren't done yet. Don't squirm or this will take forever." Once he stopped resisting, I starting working my way down his back, massaging the muscles. "I know Sheila told you about us and our agreement. Right now there are only two things that are keeping me from breaking your silly neck. First Zig Zag would maul me, and second Sheila would kill me."

Hearing that he tensed up again, but didn't try to get away. "However I'm not an unreasonable sort of bloke, so I'll make you a deal. As long as you don't upset or otherwise hurt Sheila, then you have free reign with her. Just don't treat her like some play toy that you can dispose of when you're ready to leave. Does that sound reasonable?"

For a couple of minutes, he didn't respond, "There was no reason to threaten me. I would not do that to Sheila. We are friends, and have been so for a very long time. I would not do that her." Working on the pressure points around the base of his spine, I heard him grunt as I forced his tail muscles to relax, "Considering the state I found her in last night, I'd say that's not quite true." Hearing this he turned his head a little to hear me better. "She was in the shower when I got home. She was ashamed at what she had done. She had betrayed my trust and it hurt her as much as it hurt me."

His ears drooped at this. It hadn't occurred to him that Sheila would feel guilty, "Ja. I understand. Sheila told me she found someone special. When she said that you wouldn't mind her work, I thought that we would be able to just enjoy ourselves too. I didn't realize that she was that committed." Working on his left leg, I nodded, "We're very close, though we aren't engaged or anything." Pausing for a breath, I continued, "You two have been together along time. I understand that. I won't get in the way. Sheila's happiness is what I'm concerned about, and if she's happier with you, I won't stand in her way. Just make sure you're serious about her and not just toying around."

Having set the scene, I continued working on Bjorn, hoping that if I did jump soon, Sheila would have someone to fall back on that could give her the physical and emotional support she needed.

If he hurt her though, there wasn't any damned demon curse that would keep me from coming back and mauling his ass.

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Taking a break from the shoot while they redecorated the set, Sheila slipped into Sabrina's closet. Sitting on the edge of the desk, she shoved some folders out of the way,

"Any word on those pictures?" Sheila asked in a conspiratorial low voice. Nodding, Sabrina took a sip of her cocoa, "Yep. I gave the copies to the Archivist at the University Library. He did some research. Apparently the face belongs to a Demon called 'Lakesh', though he found an obscure reference to this Lakesh being a Dragon, not a demon. Also the back appears to be some sort of history, almost like a lineage."

The shock of Lakesh being described as a dragon hit Sheila like a punch. Arden's diary talked about him walking the path of the dragon, but didn't talk about Lakesh! Did he even know that Lakesh might be related to the dragons? It was something she'd have to talk to him about.

Remembering where she was, Sheila thought for a second, "Does he have any information about this lineage? Or any other information translated yet?" Shaking her head again, Sabrina took another sip, "Nope. And he asked if you had the originals of the object. Apparently there was some detail loss when you photocopied it."

Sheila tried to think if she could smuggle the book out. She'd need to see if it had been moved since she put it back. If he wasn't reading it, she might be able to sneak it out. Or better yet, she'd make a copy of the actual amulet! "Sabrina, if I brought you the actual medallion, could you scan it into your computer for him? Make a real high quality picture?"

Thinking about it, Sabrina nodded, "Sure. But if you have the actual object, why not just let him work with that?" Sheila shook her head. No way was that going to happen, "Sorry, but it's something I can't let out of my possession. I could let you scan it though. Just make sure he doesn't know who has it. I think it may be very valuable."

Nodding, Sabrina could understand. If this thing was rare, it could be worth millions. People killed for less.

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Finished up with Bjorn, I walked around towards the front of the building heading over to Philippe's. I was allergic to one of the new oils and it was driving me nuts, making my hand itch. I wanted to get something from him while Sheila cleaned up in the shower.

Passing by Sabrina's "office", I saw a young fox standing in the doorway. He was casually dressed in kaki pants and a Penguins hockey shirt. As I approached, he pushed the glasses up on his snout. I chuckled, remembering how often I used to do that on my old face.

Just as I was getting to the door, I saw Sabrina come almost bowl him over, wrapping him in an embrace and giving him a hard kiss. Freezing, I realized that this wasn't just any fox; this had to be Chris Foxx! If that was Foxx, then that means that Sabrina was going to die in a car accident. She was already dead. She just didn't know it yet.

Spotting me, Sabrina must have mistaken my look. She smiled and led Chris over, "Chris, this is Arden, he's the guy I was telling you about that was hit by Zig Zag." Leaning in close, she gave him a semi conspiratorial whisper, "He's also Sheila's current squeeze" and giggled. Sticking his hand out, he smiled, "Hi. Glad to meet you."

Numbly I took his hand and shook it, "It's.. uhhh.. nice to meet you too." Smiling at Sabrina, "You'll excuse me, I've got someone waiting in the back on me."

Walking away, I somehow managed to get to the back room. Staggering in, I followed the counters back to a corner between them. Leaning against the wall, I let myself slide

down until I was sitting on the floor. Leaning my head against the wall, I closed my eyes and tried to get control of my emotions. I knew she was supposed to die come Christmas during a snowstorm. Killed in an encounter with a tractor-trailer. If I stayed I could potentially save her life. Again I was being forced to make a decision.

It took me a few seconds to realize someone was shaking me. Opening my eyes, I saw it was Sheila, standing in front of me with a towel wrapped around her, dripping, "Are you ok?" All I could do is nod. Concerned, she squatted, "What's wrong?"

Could I even tell her? Would it even come to pass? What if I'm wrong, and it doesn't happen. "I met Sabrina's boy friend, Chris Foxx." She gave me a confused look, "So?" Banging my head against the wall, I gave a sigh, "Don't you remember what I told you about coming from my world? How I knew things from this world that nobody should know?" Nodding, she waited. I was going to have to spell it out for her, "I know when and how Sabrina's going to die Sheila. I know that part of her future. Seeing Chris confirmed it for me."

I saw her rock back as if I had slapped her. She understood.

I really was sure I hated my life now.



# Chapter 37

Can one challenge fate?

Bjorn had thought about what the bear had said regarding Sheila. They had been together for such a long time, that he just naturally assumed that she would welcome him. When she had told him about her new boyfriend, he had naturally presumed it was just another flickering flame that would soon burn out.

The odd thing was that their attitude had changed. Sheila was still happy to work with him, but she wasn't showing much affection to either him or the bear lately. Thinking about the bears comment about not getting in the way, Bjorn knew that he was missing important pieces to the picture.

To top it off, he also realized just how much he cared for Sheila. He had become complacent with their relationship, counting on her just being there whenever he was in town. It had been a rude awakening to discover that he had been pushed out of top billing.

To make matters worse, Sheila was the only real reason he was still working with Zig Zag. Sure Zig was a fun romp, and could definitely rattle his bones, but she was retired now. Tammy and the others were fun, but there wasn't a spark with them like he had with Sheila.

Driving back to the apartment, Bjorn contemplated his situation and how to make good with Sheila. She was too good a catch to let slip off the hook.

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Daniel Khansman didn't hate all tigers, just one. She was getting to be more of a pain than that pesky cop. The news that his latest hired gun had been snipped by a mysterious guardian had not been entirely unexpected.

This time, things were going to be a little different. He had hired a professional mercenary team that specialized in high profile assassinations. They had taken out the head of the Green Party in England last year with such precision that the explosive obliterated their target, but left the people sitting beside him untouched. They had also gotten away without a trace.

When they heard that Tigger was acting as a guardian angel for the bear, they had been most happy to agree. She had stolen several of their contracts and, on one occasion, actually killed one of their team so that she would get the target.

The enemies of my enemy... It was enough to restore his faith in the underworld.

Now all he had to do was sit back and wait for the good news. They had estimated a kill within two weeks, maybe sooner. As long as he could keep the cop chasing his tail, there was no rush.

Revenge is a dish best savored over time.

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Helping Zig Zag with the dishes, I washed and she wiped. Thinking about what we had been through I realized I was going to miss Zig Zag, more sooner than later because this

would be the last night in her house. She had mentioned that the work on Sheila's apartment was done.

"I guess you'll be happy to get rid of us tomorrow, eh?" I asked, handing her a dish. Taking it, she just held it a second, "Actually, it's been kind of fun. I normally don't bring anyone here." She replied. Drying the dish, she continued, "But I've got to say, I'm pretty used to having my own quiet time without having to worry about some nosy bear trying to be helpful all the time." Grinning, she elbowed me as she took the next plate, "I can't say everything's been fun and games, but I am glad everything's working out."

Nodding, I watched the sink drain while drying my hands. The swirling waters mirrored my emotions ever since I got here. "I want you to understand something Zig Zag. I never wanted to be a problem, and I certainly never wanted to bring danger into your life. But when all is said and done, I'm damned glad to have had this time to spend with you." I told her sincerely.

Handing me the towel, she watched me dry my hands, "Hey kiddo. I'm just kicking you out of the house, it's not like I'm going to fire you." She said. I just shook my head, and said, "Zig Zag, I've been pretty lucky." Counting on my fingers, "I've been hit by a car, shot in a drive-by, almost got Sheila killed in her bed and almost got you shot at James' house. Then, to top it all off, I go berserk and charge a guy with a rifle across an open field with no cover." Leaning heavily against the counter, I watched the waning moon ripple in the pool, "For all I know, someone could try again tomorrow. Hell I could just have the dumb luck to choke on a bone."

Putting her hand on my shoulder, she gave me a reassuring squeeze, "I wouldn't worry about it." She said. I gave her a "Are you nuts?" glance. "You've been telling me about this dragon spirit or whatever you call it. Maybe it's not some ordinary dragon, maybe it's a luck dragon." She told me.

I had to smile. It made a weird sort of sense. Turning, I reached out and gave her a gentle bear hug (like I can give any other kind?). Returning the hug, I could feel her claws rubbing against the old stitches. "Say Zig Zag, can I ask a small favor?" I asked. Sighing against my chest, she went semi-limp, "Only if you stop calling me Zig Zag." she quipped, "You're the only person who insists on that. Try Zigs or something for a change will yah? I feel like I'm talking to a stranger sometimes."

Letting go of her, I opened up a drawer by the sink and took out a pair of small scissors. Holding them out, I offered them to Zig Zag, "Would you mind removing the stitches from my back, Zig Zag?" Taking the scissors, she just crossed her arms and stared at me. It took a moment for it to sink in, "Ahh.. Umm. How about Zigster? Zigarooni? Zigmeister? Ziggy Wiggy?" I quipped, grinning. With that last one she held up her hands, "No. Not that one. Never that one if you value your life. Ziggy I can live with, but not that!" She laughed.

Turning around, I leaned against the side counter so she'd have a clear shot at my back, "Whatever you wish Mistress." Chuckling, she snipped the first one, "Better be careful there kiddo. I'm the wrong one to use that line on. You never know what might happen."

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Returning to the bedroom, I saw Sheila sprawled out, face down on the bed. She hadn't even bothered to take off her clothes. Removing her shoes, I began to massage her feet. Kneading the sole of her foot, I listened to her moan. "Tell me something. Why is it, of all the performers at the studio, you are the only one who doesn't let me work them over at the shop?" I asked. "Why do it at work, when we can have so much more fun here?" She answered. Got to admit, she has a point.

Changing from using my fingers to using my claws, I began to tickle her feet. Giving a small screech, she yanked her feet away, "Hey! No fair. I thought you were giving me a massage!" She yelled. Sitting down on the bed beside her, I leaned over, "I was, but I changed my mind. Women haven't quite cornered that market yet." I replied. As we kissed, she suddenly clamped down on my tongue with her teeth. My eyes flew open in time to see her grinning at the look of shock on my face. Keeping a solid grip on my tongue, she ran her claws down the side of my ribs and began tickling my sides. Trapped, I was unable to escape so I did as any good bear would: I retaliated. Taking my claws, I started digging in around her ribs. Laughing, she inadvertently released my tongue.

Lurching back, I fell rather unceremoniously off the bed and on the floor. Before I had a chance to catch my breath, I saw Sheila airborne. She almost looked like a cat going for the kill. Landing on my stomach, she interrupted my scream of terror and drove the wind out of me. Tickling me mercilessly, she wouldn't give me a break to catch my breath. Trying to fight her off, I was forced to grab her in a bear hug and roll over, pinning her and knocking over the chair with my luggage on it. Now, finally able to catch my breath, I luxuriated in the feel of her squirming beneath me, trying to get free. Freeing my arms from beneath her, I lifted up and began relentlessly ticking her. Squealing loudly, she returned the favor, eventually driving me back. Trying to catch our breaths between laughing we both tried to get control of ourselves.

Pausing for a good breath, I heard Zig Zag laughing. Looking over, I saw that she was in the doorway. "It's a Kodak moment," she said, holding her digital camera. Shaking my head weakly, "No fair. Remember our agreement about no cameras." Hearing this, Sheila lost it again.

Rolling over, I jumped unsteadily to my feet. Seeing this, Zig Zag let out a squeal of her own and hauled the door shut as she backed into the hall. Yanking the door open, I saw the flash of her tail as she headed out into the living room. Digging my claws into the carpet, I sprinted afterwards in pursuit. Rounding the corner I saw Zig Zag hastily pull the memory module on the camera and discard the camera on the couch.

Spotting me, she ran around the couch, trying to keep it between us. Not deterred in the least, I jumped over the couch, one hand on the back to help stabilize the landing. Seeing this, Zig Zag darted around the couch yelling incoherently for me to stay back.

This was getting fun.

Launching myself again, I followed her back down the hallway to the bedroom she'd converted into a study. As I was closing the gap she made it through the door and tried to

shut it. Putting my foot in the opening, I prevented it from closing. Laughing as I slowly forced the door open, I heard her give out a small curse as she realized she was trapped. I almost fell flat on my face as Zig Zag pulled away from the door. Stepping in, I gave her the most sinister looking, lecherous grin I could find.

Back against the wall, Zig Zag looked for a way out. Seeing the look on my face, she straightened up, got a sly smile of her own. I paused trying to figure out what she was thinking, when I saw her hold up the chip for a second. Before I could grab it, she pulled the elastic on the front of her shorts out and dropped the card in.

"No!" Laughing at my reaction, she gloated at her apparent victory. Leaning against the wall, she crossed her arms, her tail pulled up between her legs waved at me, egging me on. Narrowing my eyes, I gave a small growl, "You don't think I'll do it, do you?" I growled. Breaking her smile long enough to stick her tongue at me, she laughed.

Fighting with myself for a second, I came to the conclusion that it was time to call her bluff. Just as I started forwards I heard a voice behind me, "What the hell is going on in here?" It was James. She had been saved by the bell. Fighting the overwhelming desire to strike and get the chip back, I knew that James would totally freak out.

Standing there in mid stalk, like a statue, Zig Zag strutted by. Giving me a little pat on the muzzle, she said, "You know, you're kind of cute when you're annoyed." Stepping past me, she gave me a hard goose with her claws. Startled, I let out a yelp and jumped about a foot forward. Giving a giggle, she led James away.

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Returning to the bedroom, I shut the door none to gently. Proceeding into the bathroom, cranked the water in the shower on. Letting the heat soak into my fur, I tried to relax and let the tension out. The game had been fun up until James walked into it. There's no way he would have understood me ripping off Zig Zag's shorts for any reason, although the look on his face might have been worth it.

While I was contemplating my missed opportunity to annoy James, Sheila climbed in the shower. Rubbing her fingers through the fur on my back she asked, "She got away with it eh?" "If James hadn't walked in, I'd have won that round," I replied, nodding. "Somehow I don't think he would have appreciated me ripping off her shorts no matter how good the reason." I told her. Smiling at her laughter, I let the last of the tension flow out of me.

Still leaning forward on the tiles, I almost purred at the feeling as Sheila rubbed the shampoo into my back. Working her way down the back of my body, I was somewhat disappointed at the fact she didn't try any tricks. After finishing up, she turned and let me work on her back. As I worked on shampooing her fur, I tried every trick I knew to get her to loosen up without success. Giving up, I continued grooming her fur in as impersonal manner as possible. After rinsing the shampoo out and doing the conditioner cycle, I waited for Sheila as she dried off.

Other than her question when she first got in, she hadn't said a word. She had almost given me the cold shoulder, but for the impersonal grooming. It was as if I was

something to be dealt with. Watching her in the dryer, I realized that she might already be lost to me.

After getting out of the dryer, I saw that Sheila was already in bed, under the sheets. Turning off the lights, I climbed in next to her and tried to cuddle up. Again I got the cold shoulder. Rolling onto my back, I decided to try to break the mood. "So, how was work today." I asked. Shrugging, she gave a small, "Eh," of a noncommittal nature. Giving a snort, I laughed, "Wow. Bjorn must really be slipping." I commented. No reaction. "The poor guy's performance only rated an 'Eh'. I better find him some ginseng or something like that before it's too late." I joked. She kicked me. I had lost her.

"Tomorrow I'll ask Zig Zag to spot me the money for an apartment. You won't have to worry about me any more." I said dejectedly. Rolling away, I tried to get comfortable, missing the close feeling I had grown accustomed to. Lost in thought about my dismal future, I almost missed it when Sheila started talking. "It's not that I don't want to worry about you, I just don't want to get too close to you. I don't want the pain of losing you to be any harder than it is now." She explained to me.

Rolling back over, I put my hand on her shoulder, "I never wanted to hurt you. You know that." I told her earnestly. I could feel her nod. My leaving was going to do far more damage to her than I thought. I had been responsible for opening a very special part of her heart, and now she was afraid of the pain. She might be gun shy in the future from ever letting someone get this close again.

Duty and Honor, those are the ways of the Dragon. But I'm a bear. Despite the fact that Dragon now supports me, I will always walk the path of bear. But by my own actions, I will be condemning that which I claim as my own. If that's the case, then so be it.

Scooting over next to her, I put my muzzle on her shoulder and spoke softly, "Tell me not to go." I told her. Turning her head, she gave me a questioning grunt. "If you tell me not to go, then I won't. I'll stay here with you." I said again. Rolling over, she looked at me in the dimness of the room, "But what about Nanuk and the Dragon?" She asked me. Shaking my head, I caressed her muzzle, "To hell with them. Sometimes the needs of the one come before the needs of the many. I promised I would never leave you for as long as you would have me. Again I say, tell me not to go." Reaching up, she pulled my hand from her face, "You would do this for me?" She asked. Cupping her head with my hand, I pulled her forwards into a kiss. "I would live or die for you. How could I not stay for you? I love you." I told her.

Hearing this, she began to silently cry. Bundling her in my arms, I held her close, rocking back and forth. Once again, I tapped my inner reserves and sang the woman I loved to sleep.

In the back of my head, I could hear the dragon roaring with rage. Screw him, I wasn't going to destroy the woman I loved for his or anyone else's sake.

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Tigger wasn't a happy camper. It was absolutely blind luck that had allowed her to spot the leader of Echo Team today. He could only be in town because of Khansman. If they

were here, then odds are they would target the bear in an attempt to get to her. This was escalating to a level she didn't like.

Technically she didn't owe the bear or cat any protection. She had done it just to piss off Khansman. With Echo Team in town, she was now the prey. It was time to make a decision.

She could abandon the hunt and admit defeat. This was not a viable option for her. She'd never turned down a contract, especially if it was with herself.

She could simply take out Khansman. Without his backing, it's possible that Echo Team would pull out. They hated her, but profit was foremost in their mind. To them, her desire for revenge was a deficit. She considered it an extreme hobby.

She could bring in some extra help and work on containing Echo Team. If she could keep them tagged and located, they wouldn't be a major threat. If she could track them to an appropriate location, she might even take some of them out.... But using outside help would be cheating.

Lastly, she could try to handle them herself. It would be difficult, even suicidal. But if she managed to pull it off, she would have proven herself to be the Queen of the Hill in her profession. No longer would there be any dispute over who was better.

Yes, she'd take them out, one at a time, nickel and dime, obliterating their memory from the face of the earth. Then, just to reward herself, she'd cap Khansman for dessert.

# Chapter 38

A modest proposal.

Getting to work early, Sheila gave Arden a quick kiss as they went their separate ways. Looking into Sabrina's closet, Sheila saw that she was in. Hurrying back to her locker, Sheila checked to make sure nobody was around. Opening it up, she removed a box with a colorful, "Road Kill Helper" label on it. The box had been a gift from a friend, and was always in her locker. Opening it, she removed the amulet and replaced the box in its usual position. Closing the locker, she hurried over to Sabrina's closet.

Closing the door, Sheila once again hopped up on the corner of the desk. With the free space created by her new flat screen monitor, Sabrina was now able to designate that corner for "the guest chair." Removing the amulet, Sheila held it up for Sabrina to see, "This is it." Sheila announced.

Taking the amulet, the first thing Sabrina noticed was that it was quite warm. Suspicious, she wondered just where Sheila had been hiding it. Snickering to herself, she was just glad it wasn't wet. Looking at the front, she saw the face that had been carved in detail. The gems were magnificent. They appeared to have a life of their own, reflecting a different color depending on how the light hit them. She had heard about the 'inner fire' of diamonds, but never anything like this.

Using the magnifying lamp that she checked proof prints with, Sabrina examined the detail. The archivist was correct, there was a lot of detail on the back that wasn't discernable in the photocopy of the drawing. Rotating the back so as to follow the text, there was something wrong with what she was seeing. She couldn't quite put her finger on it, but there was something definitely wrong.

"Well? Can you scan it?" Sheila asked. Sheila's question took Sabrina by surprise. The medallion had mesmerized her. Flipping open the scanner, she carefully placed the medallion on the glass taking great care not to scratch the scanning surface. Closing the cover, she brought up her scanning software. Setting it for maximum resolution, she waited for the image to appear. The medallion, originally just a few inches across was now a virtual three feet across. Detail and texture was readily available. Storing the image on the hard drive, she scanned the back. Storing this one also, she then made copies onto a Zip disk to take to the archivist. The images were too huge to send via e-mail. She was going to have to SneakerNet them over.

Removing the medallion, Sabrina reluctantly handed it back to Sheila. There was some attraction that made her want to hold on to it. Realizing this, she gave a small shudder, and vowed not to touch it again unless absolutely necessary.

"I'll take these images over to the archivist during lunch. Hopefully he'll be able to make better use of them." She told Sheila. Hopping off the desk, Sheila tucked the medallion away, "Thanks Sabrina, I appreciate the help." She said.

Making her way back to her locker, Sheila once again tucked the medallion safely away in her locker. Verifying that nobody was around to have seen her, she changed clothes for today's shoot.

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Zig Zag closed the door to her office. Taking the memory module out of her purse, she plugged it into the adapter on her PC. Accessing the camera maker's utilities, she downloaded the video to the computer. She had gotten the camera from her study to do some video with James, but hearing Sheila's screech she looked in to see Arden tickling her. Setting the camera from single-frame to video mode, she proceeded to shoot the entire sequence. Laughing again as Sheila trapped his tongue; Zig Zag was wiping tears from her eyes by the time the video had ended. The look on Arden's face when he saw the camera was priceless.

Opening power point, she began the process of 'dissecting' the scene. This would be the subject of today's 'shoot critique'.

Nobody tells Zig Zag that she can't get them in front of a camera.

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The booth Bjorn and Sheila were seated in was located in a back corner of the small French restaurant. Bjorn had arranged for the isolated seating when he called to make reservations. During their meal, the conversation had been light and lively. Sheila was obviously in a better mood than she was in yesterday.

Taking a sip of wine during a lull in the conversation, Bjorn made up his mind. He had been anxious about what he was going to do, but now he was certain.

Taking her hand across the small table he gave it a squeeze, "You know Sheila, if it was not for you, I probably would not be doing this job for Zig Zag." He told her. The surprise showed clearly on her face. He continued, "In the past, working in this industry, there were always many talented, and un-talented people that I had to work with. But over the years, I have always looked forward to working with you."

Sheila looked a little uncomfortable, almost as if she was going to blush, "Well thanks Bjorn. I've always looked forward working with you. It's almost like we were made to work together." She said.

Thinking to himself, "Bjorn, do not screw this up," Bjorn reached under the table and removed a small box from his jacket. He began, "I think that it is important for us to think not only of the past, but of the future." Seeing that she didn't follow where this was going, Bjorn simply set the small box on the table and pushed it towards her.

Picking up the box, Sheila's curiosity was peaked. Opening it up, she gasped at the ring inside. It was a small gold band with what had to be at least a 1.5 or 2carat diamond. Looking up she stared at Bjorn, her mouth hanging slack.

Taking the box from her, Bjorn removed the ring and grasped her hand. Slipping the ring onto her finger, he looked at her and asked, "Sheila Vixen, will you marry me?"

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Taking the Zip disk with her, Sabrina headed over to the library and up to the digital media room. Old man Jacobs had agreed to meet her there at one o'clock to examine the imagery and ensure that it was to his satisfaction. Entering the room, Sabrina saw a dozen



or so large Sun workstations running X Windows. The monitors on them were huge. She wondered how they got them up here without having to use a crane.

Spying the archivist in the corner, she saw him examining a high-resolution image of an ancient scroll. Walking over, she dragged a chair up next to the desk and sat down. Hearing the scrape of the chair, Jacobs looked over at Sabrina and smiled, "Ah, yes." He said, "The pretty girl from the studios and her wonderful pictures."

Blushing, Sabrina looked away for a second, and said, "Please understand, I just work there, I'm not in any of the pictures." Giving her a confused look, the archivist asked, "But why would you be in the pictures? I thought you were bringing me images of the medallion, yes yes, the medallion?" he said. Relief flooded her system. She had assumed he was referring to her job at ZZ Studios and not the zip disk. Removing the disk from her purse, she passed it over to the archivist and watched him insert it into the drive.

Working the mouse, the archivist looked over the top of his spectacles at the screen as he minimized the scroll and opened the first image on the disk. As the image popped up on the screen, it occupied almost two thirds of the available space on the 32" monitor.

"Ahhhh. This is much better, much better, yes. Look," he said, pointing at the screen, "here, the detail of these letters was lost. Now we see, yes yes yes, we can see the detail of the text. I was right, this is the symbol for dragon, and here." Rotating the image 180 degrees, he pointed to a similar symbol on the opposite side, "This is the symbol for demon. You see how similar they are yes... yes... yes? They are almost identical, yes... yes... yes?" Rotating the image 90 degrees, he pointed again, "And here, this is the symbol for Lakesh. See how it is built around the symbol for the demon. Together they form his name." Again the archivist flipped the image, "And here, this is the same outer symbol encompassing the dragon." Smiling he looked at Sabrina, "It would appear that Lakesh is also considered a dragon."

Taking notes on her pad, Sabrina watched him as he loaded the backside of the image. "Ah yes. Wonderful detail, just wonderful." He muttered to himself, while studying the image, then confusion slowly crept across his face. "What is this? What...what...what? This is not the same! This is different!" He exclaimed.

Sitting up at that, Sabrina looked at him, "I don't understand. How is it different?" Zooming in on the center of the image, Jacobs pulled out the photocopies from his pockets. "Here, in the center. The inscription is wrong. It's different." He explained it to her, showing Sabrina the paper and placing it beside the image on the monitor, he examined them together. "Your medallion is a later version of the original drawing. Look here. The drawing had this text here at the very center working out from the middle. Now here on your medallion, these symbols don't show up until after this new block of text. It would appear that your lineage on this medallion is a generation later."

Examining the pictures, Sabrina also saw the difference now that he had pointed it out. That must have been what she saw was wrong, but didn't recognize. "So this isn't the same medallion then?" She asked. Shaking his head, Jacobs continued to look at the image, and told her, "No, my dear, it is not. Although the front is identical, the rear is

obviously different." Zooming out to the edge, he followed the text until the pixelation made it unreadable. "This is truly amazing. The detail on the letters does not degrade. I've never seen such small detail rendered so perfectly. Even the mint would have trouble making an object of this quality. Either this is the product of amazing workmanship, or someone is manufacturing medallions with ancient texts, half of which I don't even recognize with a technology that is obscenely expensive. This is quite intriguing, quite intriguing."

Zooming back in on the center, he looked down inside his glasses. "And this is the frosting on the cake." He said to her. Pointing to numerous points on the text, "Here, here, all these symbols have common thread. You see the connector between them? A colleague of mine in Portugal identified it for me. It's the symbol for change or transition. He wasn't sure about the drawing, but this detail is confirmation of what he sent me, yes... yes... yes. Each of the entries is a transition, from one person to another. The odd thing is that they are distinct changes that don't appear to be related. The identities do not repeat between each section. As if it's documenting unrelated events or people. This is amazing, yes... yes... yes... most amazing." He mused.

Examining the symbols Sabrina asked, "What do the individual symbols mean? Do you have any ideas?" Shaking his head, he replied, "It's a mess. There are people, animals, mythological references, and things I've NEVER seen before. I'm not sure what they are supposed to be representing, as it doesn't make sense, no sense at all. This is going to be a most interesting project, most interesting, indeed."

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Working on Leon again, I occasionally had to stop and rub my palms. I don't know which oil it was, but I sure as heck was allergic to one. I guess I'd have to see about getting tested. That or start wearing gloves. Finishing up with him, I scrubbed my hands down and put the lotion on that Philippe had given me to help with the itching.

As I was starting to clean up, Clarence came in, "Hey Arden. Zig Zag wants to see you." He informed me. Tossing the towel in the hamper, I walked to the door, "No sweat, just tell whoever's next that I'll be late." I told him. Noticing his nervous look, I tossed over my shoulder, "Oh don't worry, nobody's scheduled for a bit." As I started over towards Zig Zag's office Clarence stopped me and said, "Um, she's in the viewing room."

I froze. She wanted me in the viewing room? She wouldn't dare. Turning, I walked to the video room. Opening the door, my suspicion was confirmed. Everyone was seated with Zig Zag at the small podium off on the side. "Arden, just the man we were waiting for. Come on up here." She told me. Letting out a low growl as I proceeded around the room, I gave Zig Zag a dangerous glare as I approached.

Gesturing me up on the podium beside her, she smiled, "As we all know, Arden has been working here for the last week. He and Tony have been doing research on enhancing our video capabilities to allow us to do some rather spectacular visual effects we'd never imagined would be available to us. In the afternoons, he's also taken over the job of masseuse since our last one left. As is our tradition, we like to take a moment at

our Friday highlights review to welcome new members of our little family and make them feel at home." She announced. Everyone in the room began applause politely.

Still suspicious of Zig Zag, I smiled and gave a polite wave to everyone. Tammy was patting an empty chair in the front row next to me. It looked like I had reserved seating.

Sitting down, I gave her a polite smile while removing her paw from the inside of my leg and held it in my hand. Sitting back, I watched the highlights of the week's shoots.

I now understood Bjorn's attraction.

Careful to keep my face neutral, I watched the rest of the videos. Other than the wide variety of shapes involved, it was just like that stuff I'd seen back in the old world. As the video ended, everyone hooted and cheered Bjorn. Joining in, I was more than happy to give credit where it's due.

Returning to the lectern, Zig Zag switched the projector from the VCR over to the laptop she had with her. "OK. And now I'd like to talk about adding humor to some of our work." She announced. Holding up a remote control, she hit a button bringing up the ZZ Studios logo. As the graphic spun off the screen my blood ran cold. She was actually going to show it.

Projected on the ten-foot tall screen was myself bending over to kiss Sheila. You couldn't quite make out what I said, but my tongue twitched as I saw Sheila bite down on it. The hoots of laughter as she began tickling me drowned out any chance of anyone hearing the tape. The scene played out, my retaliation, falling on the floor, then Sheila jumping up off the bed. The image froze, "Anyone else in here think that Sheila must have some cat in her?" Asked Zig Zag facetiously. Suspended in the air, she looked like a cat pouncing on her prey. The terror on my face and my inarticulate scream was held in suspended animation. Several people in the row behind me pounded on my back.

As Zig Zag clicked the button again, I once again felt Sheila landing on my stomach. The one thing that grabbed my attention though was how far my tongue shot out. I hadn't realized it could do that. I guess you learn something new.

The scene became unsteady as Zig Zag began laughing. On screen, I rolled over pinning Sheila to the floor. As I watched her squirm on the screen, someone in the back yelled, "Oh yah! I know how GOOOOOOood that feels!" sparking even more laughter. As we began the direct tickle fight, I began to laugh remembering how fun it had been, all memories of my embarrassment lost in the moment.

On screen, we had finally broken apart. Sheila lay on the floor, myself leaning against the bed, laughing hysterically at the event. My shoulders received more poundings from my supporters. On screen, I looked at the camera. You could clearly hear Zig Zag's voice over the speakers, "It's a Kodak Moment." Everyone in the room gave another roar of appreciation at her comment.

On screen, I jumped up. The image swung wildly as Zig Zag slammed the door and began running down the hall. As the video ended, everyone stood and cheered. Gesturing

for me to come up on the stage, Zig Zag rolled the screen up into its storage in the roof. Getting up, I stepped up onto the platform.

Raising her hands, Zig Zag calmed the crew down. "Now as you all know, we normally show the climax footage from the scenes for the new actor in our stable. However Arden doesn't have any. So just to make him feel at home...." As she said this, I noticed that she was now standing over by the podium. Looking back out into the audience, I saw that my two supporters in the 2nd row now held "super soakers". Putting my hands up for defense, I was nailed by streams of the most gawd awful slippery mess I've ever gotten in my fur.

Once again the room cheered at the spectacle before them. I now knew how the Roman Gladiators felt in the arena. After a few seconds they stopped firing and Zig Zag spoke up again, "I know it's not the same thing folks, but I guess we can now declare our boy baptized!"

Standing in a pool of spreading goop, I began laughing. Raising my arms in victory, I took a couple of bows and blew Zig Zag a kiss. Reaching out with my left hand, I raised the other high in the air, "Let's hear it for Zig Zag! The lady knows how to throw a party."

Smiling, Zig Zag made the mistake of stepping a little ways out on the stage. Taking a bow, I motioned for her to do so also. While she was deep in her bow I took a wide step in her direction. Slipping on the crap they had squirted me with, I think I pulled a groin muscle. Ignoring the pain, I snagged her arm. She Screeched as I yanked her off balance and caught her in my arms, dragging her down into the pool of goop.

As she struggled to break my hold I realized that I had underestimated just how slippery this stuff was. I had planned on a quick pin, but this was turning into a classic mud-wrestling event. People were cheering both of us on. I could hear the occasional bets being taken on the victor. Trapping her tail between my arm and ribs, I used it as leverage to roll over and pin her. Struggling vainly to get away, she was unable to escape my grasp. Slapping the floor, she conceded the match.

Pushing myself back onto my knees, I helped her sit up. We were both grinning like idiots. Licking off my muzzle, I was struck with the most grotesque taste. Good lord, what did they use to make this stuff? Looking down, I saw a similar look on Zig Zag's face, which pleased me to no end. Getting unsteadily to my feet, I felt a twinge in my groin from where I pulled the muscle.

Reaching down a hand, I lifted Zig Zag up. Standing next to me, she indicated we should take another bow. Yelling over the hoots, I asked her, "You're videotaping this aren't you?" Laughing she nodded. Seeing me roll my eyes to the heavens, she stuck her tongue out at me. Waving to the crowd, we then proceeded to the locker/shower area. Someone had thoughtfully put towels on the floor between the video room and the showers. No need to have to shampoo the carpet.

Stripping down, I made a point of ignoring Zig Zag who was doing the same, "Sorry about the soaking Zigs, but you did ask for it." I told her. Laughing, she tossed her shirt

over, covering my head, "Don't worry, I keep extra clothes around for just such an occasion." She replied.

Walking back to a shower, I turned on the water and waited for it to get warm. Stepping in, I started to pull the curtain, when I saw Zig's hand snake around the edge. Hanging her towel on the bar outside, she started to climb in. "Beg your pardon, but are you having trouble finding an open stall?" I asked her. Holding up some shampoo, she smiled, "I know for a fact that this crap is hell to get out of your fur. We're both going to need help getting it out, especially since you insisted on us rolling around in it." She told me.

Narrowing my eyes, I scowled, "No tricks and no games?" The smile slowly left her face, "OK. Cross my heart, no tricks no games." She answered. Taking the shampoo, I turned her around and started lathering her up good. She was right, this crap was hell to get out. "Man, what did you guys use? Super glue?" I asked her. Laughing she glanced over her shoulder, "You had your choice of the easy road or the hard road. The easy road comes out with a lot less mess." She informed me. Licking her muzzle, she made a terrible face and added, "And it sure tastes a lot better than this stuff too.... "

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By the time we were ready to dry off, we were both laughing again. True to her word, Zig Zag didn't try any funny stuff. Going to my locker, I took the over-night bag out and removed some clothes. Getting dressed, I packed it up and headed out looking for Sheila.

Casing the building, I met Zig Zag by the front door, "No sign of her." Looking out in the parking lot, we saw her car was still there. Returning inside, Zig Zag checked the sign out sheet, "Sheila and Bjorn checked out for lunch at 11:30 but never checked back in." Zig Zag was wearing a concerned look. It wasn't like those two to disappear.

# Chapter 39

Rulez is Rulez and yaz don' breaka da rulez

This was not good. At first Tigger had been curious about why Echo Team had been so interested in the apartment. Sitting in the diner across the street, she discretely observed them as they went into the building. She soon had observed one of them checking the window on the third floor. The mystery was "Who lives there?" After the screw up with James Sheppard's house, Tigger had done a great deal of research into who worked at ZZ Studios, who they were hooked up with, and where they lived. None of them lived here.

Accounting for all the Echo Team as they left, she decided not to pursue them. The bloody bastards had given her something to chew on. The question was, did they know they had been tagged or not? Giving her ear a tug, she quickly stopped. Her current disguise as a Lynx involved appliances on the ear. She couldn't afford to have one come off now, no matter how much it itched.

Deciding to hold off on investigating the apartment till later, she paid her bill and left the restaurant. Getting in her car, she was about to pull out of the parking lot as she spotted something she did not want to see. It was Zig Zag's Mercedes. Zig Zag and the bear were in it too. Letting out a curse as they pulled into the apartment building, she waited for traffic to clear and then followed them into the parking lot.

Pulling up behind them, she grabbed her note pad and pen. Jumping out, she gave her best 'Oh my GOD' squeal and bounced over to the pair. "It's you. It's really you!" Jumping up and down again, she prayed the ears would hold. "You're Zig Zag, and you're the guy on TV! I've gotta be the luckiest! Can I get your autographs please?" She asked excitedly. Holding out the paper and pen, she bounced on the balls of her feet anxiously.

Uncapping the pen, Zig Zag asked, "Whom should I make this out to?" Leaning over as to see the paper better, Tigger replied, "Pretend to write. Your lives are in danger." Zig Zag shot her a hard look. Bouncing up and down, she nodded her head excitedly, "Pretend your signing the damned book," she said with a forced smile. Turning back to the book, Zig Zag began writing. "A team of professional mercenaries just left this building. Don't go in," she said without moving her lips. As Zig Zag wrote, Tigger noticed the bear was taking a careful look of the perimeter without turning his head. "OK. Pass it over to the bear, and for gods sake make it look like I'm just another fan." She instructed.

Signing it with a flourish, Zig Zag kissed the paper, leaving a lipstick mark and passed the paper over to Arden. As he took the pad, Tigger pressed herself against his arm, and talked, "You guys need to go somewhere safe. Give me your cell number and I'll contact you." As she watched him write the number she was surprised to see him add "Why didn't you shoot?"

For just an instant Tigger's veneer broke but she quickly recovered. "I'll explain everything. For now, just make yourself scarce. Don't go home or to offices. Just drive."

As Arden signed the book, he handed it to Tigger. Taking the book she closed it. Grabbing Arden by his arm, she hopped up and gave him a kiss. Waving, she ran back to her car. Looking at the book again, she squealed again, climbed in and drove away.

Pulling out of the lot, she saw them go inside the building. The idiots. Waiting for the traffic to clear, she watched them come out a few seconds later and climb into the car. Maybe they weren't as dumb as she thought.

Pulling onto the road, Tigger reevaluated what happened. She had just shown her face, well disguised though it may be, to an unknown element. Worse yet, she had done it in broad daylight and out in the open. She only hoped her disguise would hold up.

First thing she'd have to do is lose this car and get another. After that, she'd contact them, if they were still alive, and find out exactly what was going on.

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Watching as the Lynx bounded off to get in her car, I had to smile. That was the best act I'd seen since I started at Zig Zag's. I wonder if she'd be interested in changing professions. Shaking my head, I suddenly realized that Zig Zag had irreparably corrupted me. I never would have thought of working as a recruiter for ZZ Studios.

"Let's go," Zig Zag said, breaking my train of thought. Taking her arm, I turned her towards the building, "It would look suspicious if we just drove away without going inside." I told her. Pulling her along, I led her into the building. Pausing inside for a good count of thirty, I led Zig Zag back outside and to the car. Hopefully if anyone were watching, they'd assume that we either dropped off something, or were just checking a mailbox.

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Looking out the window of the hotel room they had rented, the Echo team member watched as Zig Zag's car pulled into the apartment complex and parked. As they got out, an old Dotson pulled into the parking lot behind Zig Zag. Swinging the telescope down, he watched a young lynx get out of the car. Hopping up and down, she literally bounced over to where Zig Zag and their target were standing. Holding out a notebook, she spoke excitedly as Zig Zag signed it. Observing the scene, he noted her face collapse as she read something. Looking at the bear, she recovered and began bouncing again. Taking the book from him, she jumped up and kissed him, then ran back to her car.

Shifting from the fan to the prey, the Echo teamster discounted the encounter with the fan. Watching them go into the apartment, he shifted his focal point to the apartment window. The curtains had been left open, allowing him a perfect view of the door. Activating the remote control, he waited for the blinking red light to turn solid, indicating that the bomb was armed.

Slowly he counted off the seconds while waiting for the door to open. Getting to fifty, he pulled away from the eyepiece and looked at the apartment building. Zig Zag and the bear were getting in the car. They hadn't even gone up to the apartment!

Giving a small curse, he picked up the phone. He needed to tell the Colonel what happened. Cursing again, he realized that he hadn't bothered to get the license number on the fan girl's car. The Colonel was going to maul him for this.

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As Zig Zag accelerated away from the apartment complex, I put my hand on her arm, "Slow down Zig Zag. The wicked flee when no man pursues. We don't want them to know we're running." I reminded her gently. I could feel her arm trembling as she slowed the car down to a reasonable speed. "Who was that woman?" She asked. Pulling down the passenger sun visor, I used the vanity mirror to look behind us, "She was the sniper at James' house." I told her. I felt her tense up, "How do you know that?" She demanded. Checking around us, I tried to inventory the traffic, "I wasn't sure. But I wrote a message on the pad. You remember seeing her face drop?" I watched her nod. "That's how I knew. Her face gave away the fact." I explained.

I was forced to grab onto the handle over the door as Zig Zag made a hard right turn, tires squealing as they fought the G-forces. "Damn it! Slow down Zig. That or let me drive. We don't need the cops stopping us either!" I yelled at her. Growling through clenched teeth, she practically barked at me, "I'm sorry. I'm not used to being hunted." Pulling over, she stopped the car. "You had better drive," she said opening the door.

Changing places, I was greeted with the same problem I used to have in the old world. Short people with their seats all the way up. After adjusting the seat, I climbed in. "Use the vanity mirror to watch behind us as we pull away. And let me know if you see any cars pull out from the curb after we do," I instructed, adjusting the mirrors. Glancing at me, she asked, "How do you know so much about this stuff?"

Putting the car in gear, I pulled out into traffic, watching the mirrors as well as ahead. "Remember when I said I had worked for the SDF? I wasn't in the regular army. I was in special operations. I was a sniper. My job was to assassinate people who were selling state secrets." I explained to her. Glancing at Zig Zag, I could see she was staring at me, jaw slack. Continuing, I told her, "They gave me an assignment to terminate a manufacturer who was selling top secret chip technology to the Chinese. I was to terminate him by shooting out his tires on a mountain road. The only problem was that he had his kids with him." (Was that the same Lumina?) "They ordered me to continue with the hit. I couldn't do it. I couldn't kill innocents. The only thing that kept me alive was the fact that I had cached black ops documentation with friends who were warned to release it on my death." (No, not the same, different driver.)

Turning onto the interstate I merged in with traffic. Driving slower than most, I watched for anyone else lagging. Zig Zag broke the silence, "I guess they're screwed." I wasn't sure what she was talking about, "Who's screwed?" I asked. "The Japanese." She replied. Oh, yah, the files, I thought, then asked, "Because of my disappearance? No. I worked out the deal a long time ago after they calmed down. After all, I was gaijin. They didn't expect me to have any honor anyway so it all worked out in the end." I explained.

I had spotted three slow moving cars. Accelerating, I now sped up faster than most traffic. Let's see if anyone was playing tag. I was concentrating on driving so hard, that I almost lost it when the cell phone rang. Zig Zag glanced at me then hit the speaker function. "This is Zig Zag," she answered.

"Listen up. I don't want to risk this being traced. After we talk, turn the phone off so they can't track you by the signal. Khansman is the guy trying to get you killed. He's



hired a professional mercenary group called Echo Team. They specialize in high profile assassinations. He hired them because I've been screwing with his plans. He now hunts me as well." A female voice told them, they recognized the "fan's" voice.

Gee thanks mommy, can I get another story now? "And just what's your interest in us? Surely you aren't the Zig Zag fan you made yourself out to be in the parking lot. Why protect me?" I asked. I heard a bark of laughter; "It's a long story. Let's just say that Khansman made the mistake of pissing me off. He wants you killed, so you've become a hobby of mine. The longer I keep you alive, the more pissed off he gets. It's one of my favorite games." She replied.

Laughing out loud I loved it. Ito had done something similar to a Taiwanese businessman in LA that wanted to have him knock off his competition for a mere fifty grand and then got all indignant when he turned him down. By the time he was done toying with the schmuck, the guy was in a straight jacket babbling about how everyone was out to get him. It had been a hoot.

"Ok. I can live with that." I told her. "Where do we go now?" I asked. "Have you been watching for a tail?" She asked. Double-checking the rear view, I verified that none of the slow cars were in sight, "Affirmative. We're on the interstate. I've done the speed check and am about to play four corners at the next interchange." I told her. I could hear the question in her voice; "You've played this game before. Just who the hell are you?" She demanded. Zig Zag was looking at me with a look that mirrored our angel's voice. Giving her a grin, I winked, "We're more alike than you could ever guess. That doesn't answer my question though, what's next?" I asked.

"Do you know where Blacklick Woods Park is?" She asked us. Looking at Zig Zag, I saw her think about it then nod. "Yah, we know where it is." I answered. "OK. I want you to meet me there in one hour. Park next to the administrative building, and then turn your cell phone back on. I'll call you then with more instructions." Our mysterious savior told us. We were coming up on the I70/I270 interchange on the west side of town. This would be a good place to play four corners. "OK. I'll keep playing tag and make sure we're not followed. We may even switch cars, so don't look for the Mercedes." I told our lady friend. "Good plan." She said, and then continued, "I'll call you in one hour."

Hanging up the cell phone, I then turned it off. Taking the exit, I planed to spend the next five minutes looping the corners of the cloverleaf interchange. If anyone were following, this would probably lose them. If nothing else, it would drive them nuts.

The game was afoot. It had been years since I had worried about a tail, and now that I was in control of the situation, I felt very alive.

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I had Zig Zag rent a Catera. It was the best size for speed option they had at the lot. Dropping Zig Zag's Mercedes at a snazzy restaurant, I got a fifty from Zig and bribed the valet to tell anyone who asked that we were inside eating. Having covered the bases, we headed over towards the park.

Getting to the park with about ten minutes to spare, I spotted the administrative building. Killing the leftover time, I drove around the perimeter mentally marking the cars that were parked. After three circuits without noticing anyone else circling or any new vehicles being parked, I pulled into the park and stopped next to the building. Turning on the phone, I put the car in park. Killing the lights and engine, I rolled the windows down to listen for car noises. I had a reasonably clear view of the entrance while the car was shadowed from the one street lamp by the building.

Reaching into the back, I pulled the overnight bag into the front seat. Opening it up, I removed the pistol and clips that James had given me. Hearing Zig Zag gasp, I looked over in time to see her going for the door handle. Shooting my right hand out, I clamped down on the front of her neck, cutting the air off. Automatically she put her hand up to my arm in order to try to pull it back, claws puncturing my skin. "You listen to me Zig Zag. Open that door, and you could get us killed." I warned her. "The roof light will come on, illuminating us for anyone out there with a rifle." Loosening my grip enough so she could breathe, "I won't allow you to kill us both because you have a fear of guns. Do you understand me?" I demanded.

I could smell the fear, and her eyes showed raw hatred. After a few seconds she nodded. Releasing her, I returned to what I was doing. As she rubbed her throat, she spoke angrily, "Don't you EVER do that to me again." Slapping a clip home, I chambered a round and set the safety. Looking at her, I gave her a small smile, "Fine, next time I'll just knock you out." I saw her eyes get wide at this, "This is no game Zig. One wrong move and it will cost me my life, yours too if we're not careful. If what I think has happened, those jokers have Sheila and Bjorn. Given the opportunity, that means that if they can, they'll use you too." Banging on the steering wheel out of frustration, I scanned the area, "This is my worst fricken nightmare Zig. Ever since I found out that someone was after me, I worried that they might try to use someone to get to me. Now I've got to do the one thing I never wanted to do again. I have to hunt down another person and kill them. The last thing I need to complicate this is you panicking every time you see a gun. If it were anyone else, I might leave them for the wolves. But I owe you, and I'm not willing to throw your life away to save mine."

The phone rang. Putting my hand over the handset, I looked at Zig Zag, "I need you to be strong." Picking up the phone, "Talk to me." I said gruffly. "Nice piece, how many clips you got?" The mystery lady asked. Looking around, I tried to spot her without any success, "I've got 4, 15 round clips, all jacketed hollow points." I informed her. "Good. In a few seconds a tan panel van will be pulling up next to the building. You'll have ten seconds to get into it." She told us. Reaching up, I popped the cover for the roof light and removed it. "Acknowledged." I said.

Terminating the call, I handed the phone to Zig Zag. "In a minute there's going to be a van pulling up. When it stops, follow my lead but don't climb in until I gesture to you." I told her. Closing my eyes, I tried to summon the power of the dragon. I could use his sight. After a few seconds I realized that I was cut off. Fine, if that's the way he wanted to play it, I could play that game too. Bear had a long memory. Rolling up the windows, I removed the key from the ignition.

Waiting, I saw a vehicle coming down the side street. As it turned into the park, we were momentarily illuminated. Having closed my eyes before getting hit by the lights, I didn't totally lose my night sight. As I watched, the van screeched to a stop. "Let's go." I said. Opening the door I got out and moved quickly towards the van, scanning the perimeter. Getting to the van, I saw Zig Zag still in the car. Stifling a curse, I slid open the door and swept the interior with my gun verifying nobody but the driver was there.

Sprinting back to the car, I opened the passenger door and grabbed Zig Zag by the scruff of the neck. Screeching, Zig grabbed for my arms as I dragged her out of the car. I didn't have time to break her out of the trance she was in. Putting my pistol hand under her ass, I heaved her up into the van and onto one of the benches. Climbing up, I grabbed the door and started to haul it shut. "Go, go, go." I told the driver.

Just as the door slammed shut, the driver accelerated away from the building heading deeper into the park and out another entrance. Glancing at Zig Zag, I saw her sitting on the floor between the bench seats, her tail curled up between her legs, huddled in a ball, glaring at me. Seeing that she would be all right, I moved up and squatted between the front seats.

The Lynx now resembled a mutated Coyote. The proportions were wrong, but a casual observer wouldn't notice. Staying low, I gave her the once over. She was wearing dark denim jeans and T-shirt. I noted a shoulder holster under the vest she wore. Glancing back she hissed, "Keep down. That damned fur stands out like a neon sign." Chuckling, I sat down on the floor behind the passenger seat.

Leaning back so I could see between the bench seats, I verified that Zig Zag was still ok. I could tell she wanted to maul me. That was fine. As long as she was alive I could deal with anything else later.

Sitting back up, I got a good grip on the bench beside me so I wouldn't be bothered by any sharp maneuvers our friend might make and tried to relax. I had no idea how long this was going to take and I didn't want to be burned out before we even got to our destination.

# Chapter 40

Welcome my friend. Welcome to the machine.

Zig Zag sat in between the two bench seats, tail between her legs, arms wrapped around her knees. This afternoon had turned into a nightmare. She had no clue what was going on with Arden. After running into the stranger, he had slowly changed until he had become someone she didn't recognize anymore.

She had panicked when he had pulled out the gun and tried to get out of the car. Remembering the event, she rubbed her throat where he had strangled her to stop her. No apologies, no reasoning. He simply had commanded her with a voice that demanded absolute obedience.

Then when the stranger had pulled up with the van, she had been too shocked to react. The pain of his claws in the fur on the back of her neck had broken the spell. Unceremoniously being tossed into the back of the van, she remembered landing hard and feeling violated by the impersonal treatment he had given her. It was like she was six years old again and her father was once again pushing her around.

Feeling the vehicle stop, she heard the driver turn off the engine. Arden and the stranger talked for a few seconds before Zig Zag felt the door close. This was a waking dream, or a nightmare. Everything around her was surreal.

Some time later she saw Arden open the sliding door and motion to her. Still looking at the gun, she slowly climbed onto her knees and crawled out of the vehicle. As he closed the door behind her, she tried to bolt. His hand grabbed her arm in a crushing grip, the pain penetrating the fog. Fighting him, she tried to strike with her free hand, only to have it casually blocked by his pistol hand. The last thing she saw were the knuckles of his gun hand returning just before they struck her head.

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Walking up the stairs of the decrepit building, we saw none of the other tenants. This was a good thing, as I'd have trouble explaining the unconscious form over my shoulder. I'm not sure why Zig Zag had freaked, but I didn't have time to be reasonable. We were vulnerable in the open and I wasn't going to risk a confrontation in public.

Carrying her up to the third floor, I was glad to see that the stairs went no further. Zig Zag wasn't all that heavy, but she wasn't any helium balloon either. Waiting at the head of the stairs, I kept watch to make sure nobody was coming up while our friend did some elaborate mojo to open the door. Once it was opened, I followed her in, listening to her bolt it behind me.

Stopping at the entryway, I waited as she proceeded into the apartment. This had been a warehouse that had been converted into apartment space. On the opposite end of the room, I saw a large cargo elevator with steel doors that were locked down. After a few seconds, our friend came back and got us.

Leading me over to what was obviously her sleeping area, I put Zig Zag on the bed. Checking to make sure she was all right, I then went out into the main room.

Seeing our friend over by a bank of electronic equipment, I approached. Standing a respectful distance from her while examining the displays. "You may as well come over and take a close look." She stated, "This is my tracking network. The various flags represent locations corresponding to homes, apartments, businesses and etc. that are involved. Green is third party, blue are good guys, and red are bad guys. The diamonds represent vehicles I've spiked with trackers."

Examining the display, I spotted Zig Zag's car where we had left it at the restaurant. I saw that James was at ZZ's house. The others I didn't know. I spotted one blue flag next to a green flag. Pointing to it, I asked, "What's this marker?" Picking up a light pen, she clicked on the icon. A sub-window popped up showing the rental car that Bjorn was driving along with his picture and some statistics on how long the vehicle had been there and where it had come from. It showed Bjorn at the lunch café that Sheila had liked. By now, it would have been closed.

Still examining the display, I asked, "Aren't you worried that they might pick up these trackers?" Shaking her head, she smiled, "Spread spectrum broadcast over multiple bands. It's hidden between the digital cell channels so it's almost impossible to pick it up unless you know exactly what to look for." Hide it in the cell traffic. That made sense. "Aren't you worried about someone picking them up?" I asked. Shaking her head, she replied, "Only people who are going to notice it are the maintenance crews for the cell towers, and even then it will look like a problem phone. Besides, they only broadcast when the vehicle starts moving, stops moving, at pre-arranged reporting times or if I ping them." That was pretty damned smart.

As I watched her reaching to adjust receivers, I saw a hint of the tiger pattern I had first seen the day she had shot the assassin at James's. Smiling, I let out a chuckle. Turning, she shot me a questioning look, "So, what's so funny?" Reaching out to her arm, I twisted the muscle and fur so she could see it, "You're tiger strips are showing through. You were in a bit of a rush." She visibly winced. Taking a sniff, I continued, "And your sent mask is fading too. Next time try coffee, it's stronger, lasts a long time and people will just assume you spilled some on yourself."

Turning to face me, she leaned back and crossed her legs. I'll be damned if she didn't look even more lethal in that pose for some reason. Studying the pose, I realized she had a thigh gun and it was pointed right at me. With a simple tensing of her legs together, she'd be able to shoot me without warning. Taking a chair next to the desk, I reached out with my foot and pointed her knee away from my gut.

Her eyes closed to a thin slit; "Just who the hell are you?" She demanded. Giving a little shrug, I looked her in the eye, "Would you believe I'm retired SDF?" I asked. Curious, she looked me over; "You don't sound Japanese, though they got your kind over there. Who were you with, Rangers?" She inquired. Shaking my head, "No, Internal Security." I corrected her.

Sitting up straight, she shook a finger, "No, no, no, no, no! Nobody retires from IS. That's like retiring from the KGB. Try again bucko." She declared. Interlacing my

fingers, I leaned back casually, "Believe whatever you want. I worked out a bit of a deal with them. They don't hunt me, and friends of mine don't release certain documents."

She just sat there, looking at me for a couple of minutes, not moving. I think she was trying to decide if I was still working for the SDF or not. Before she could make up her mind, I heard Zig Zag moaning in the other room. Getting up, I walked in there, conscious of the tiger at my back. Speaking over my shoulder, I asked, "So what should I call you?" "I go by Tigger," was the response I received.

Sitting down on the edge of the bed, I looked back at Tigger and asked, "Do you have some ice? Maybe an icepack or a rag to put it in?" Nodding, she turned and left the room. Remembering how Zig Zag had freaked at the gun, I pulled it from my waist and tried to tuck it into the back. Remembering that I stuck out on both sides now, I tried to find a comfortable place to put it without screwing with my tail while still being readily available.

Reaching over, I checked the side of her head. She was going to have a bruise on her temple from where the back of my hand had hit. Peeling open her eyes, I used my hand to create then remove a shadow, checking her pupils. While I did this, Zig Zag reached up and tried to knock my hands away, "Knock it off will you?" she demanded.

Putting her paw to the side of her forehead she tried to sit up. Pressing her shoulder down with my hand, I spoke, "Lay still. You've taken a nasty shock to the head." Moaning again, she relaxed, "What hit me? Last thing I remember was getting out of the van and..." she explained, pausing. Her eyes narrowed and she glared at me, "You bastard! You hit me!" she screamed. Backing away from the bed as she tried to maul me, I made it a point not to be too hard in deflecting her blows. "I told you next time you risked our necks I'd knock you out," I stated calmly. Shocked, she stopped attacking and stared at me. Backing up to the door, I glanced to see Tigger coming over, "Tigger is bringing ice for your head. I suggest you lay back and try to calm down." I instructed her with a flat tone of voice.

Leaving the room, I went back over to the console to keep watch. I could only hope that Zig Zag would get a clue that this wasn't some game. I was deadly serious about getting Sheila and Bjorn back and I wasn't going to let her fears cause problems.

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Zig Zag couldn't believe what she had just heard. She remembered what he said in the car, and the odd look he had given her, but she never imagined that he could do that. When he had hit Sheila, he had acted as if it were the most horrible act he could have done. Yet he sat there and matter of factually admitted he had knocked her out without any remorse. "What the hell was going on here?" she asked herself.

Looking up as their host, he had called her 'Tigger', came in with an ice pack Zig Zag took the pack from her and pressed it against her head, wincing at the pain. Zig Zag still didn't understand what was going on. This afternoon Arden had been the same fun loving tight ass she had come to know and like, but now...

Tigger's voice interrupted her thoughts; "You're a friend of his right?" She asked. Realizing that Tigger was talking to her, she looked over at her, "Yes. At least I thought so. Now... I don't have a clue who he is." Zig told her.

Looking over at the door, Tigger got up and closed it quietly before coming back over and sitting down next to Zig Zag. "There's something you've got to understand about your friend out there. Right now, Arden as you knew him doesn't exist. That Arden was just a mask of civility that was created so he could function in the real world," she explained to a stunned Zig Zag. "If what he told me is to be believed, then right now he's being controlled by 'the machine'. It's a mindset that government assassins are trained to enter when they are on a hunt or being hunted. He has no emotions for you or anyone else. He has a set goal, an objective. Anything that gets in his way is expendable," she continued, watching Zig Zag.

Seeing that Zig Zag had absorbed what she had said so far, Tigger continued, "Right now, he values you because of your past with him. You are considered an asset. If you keep fighting with him, eventually he's going to consider you a detriment to the operation. When that happens, I don't know what he'll do. I've seen guys like that shoot people for what you just tried to do." Again she waited for what she said to sink in.

With a quavering voice, Zig Zag asked, "And when all this is over? What then?" She asked. Shaking her head, Tigger put a hand on Zig Zag's shoulder and gave a supportive squeeze, "I don't know. Some of them pull out of the dive right away. Other's I've seen take years to piece their lives back together. There are a few that never recover. Since your boy wasn't obviously a cold calculating killer when you knew him, I think he'll pull out. I just don't know how long it will take."

Tigger had seen some of the twisted crap that governments did to their own people. If this guy had retired himself, then there was hope for him to pull out quick. If not, she may have to take him out after all. It was too dangerous to leave a loaded gun like that laying around, waiting to go off.

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Sitting at his desk at the police station, Michael closed the last folder on his desk and put it in the stack by the edge. That was the last case that the DA had signed off on. None of them were overly suspicious alone, but they did show a trend. The problem is that it wasn't enough to prove he was corrupt.

Rubbing his eyes, he then ran his paws through the fur on his head. As he blinked and looked around, he saw an unfamiliar form approaching his desk. Looking at him, he saw it was another cop, badge hanging from his lapel. Sitting down in the chair next to Jones's desk, the guy fanned himself with the folder, "You're the guy working on the Zig Zag cases right?" Nodding, Michael turned and gave the other detective his full attention, "Yep, that's me. Have you found anything new?" He asked. Tossing the folder on the desk, the other cop replied, "You might be interested in this. It's a kidnapping that occurred this afternoon about one thirty."

Opening the folder, Michael reviewed the information. Inside he saw that two clients had been dining the Café. After paying their bill they walked back to their car when

several armed and masked assailants grabbed them, tossed them into a van, and sped off. Subsequent investigation of the vehicle resulting in learning it had been rented to Bjorn Ottersman. His companion had been identified as Sheila Vixen of ZZ Studios.

Police had found the vehicle several blocks away. There were no fingerprints or fur that did not belong to Bjorn or Sheila. The van was stolen. It looked like a professional job. Attempts to contact Zig Zag at the studio once they had been identified had failed. According to the receptionist, she had left with his John Doe to try to locate the pair. No sign of them had been seen since.

Looking back up at the cop, he held up the file, "Do you need this?" He asked. Shaking his head, "Nope, that is a copy. If you find anything, let us know," the detective answered, standing to leave.

Returning to the folder, Michael picked up the phone and started to dial. Hopefully he'd be able to call Zig Zag or Arden on their cell phones, but he wasn't taking bets on it.

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Giving Tigger a hand, I moved a couple of heavy footlockers from the storage out into the work area by the table. Watching as she opened one, I saw a candy store. Taking out hardware, she began to lay out enough equipment to fit a small squad. At the bottom of the second box was a large Bamboo and Leather case. Placing it in front of me, Tigger stood back and watched.

Examining the box, I saw that it was tied shut with leather straps. Undoing the knots, I opened the box and saw a Katana, a Wakazashi, and a Tanto. They were sheathed in black lacquered scabbards. On the surface was engraved the name "Tamba (no) Kami Yoshimichi." Taking the Katana out, I withdrew the blade a few inches and examined its surface. The interlaced pattern, consistent with a blade that was hand forged was barely visible. If this truly was a Yoshimichi blade, it was easily two hundred years old.

Putting it back in the sheath, I placed it carefully back in the box, and closed it. Looking up at Tigger, I could see amusement on her face. "Where did you get this blade?" I asked. Sitting down across from me, she became very serious. "They belonged to a very close friend of mine, Hikaru Ito," she declared. Hearing that, I sat up straight. Hikaru was my controller when I worked for the SDF. Seeing my expression, she continued, "Like you, he left the SDF. Not because he wanted to, but because he had been disgraced."

I didn't know how to react to that. I knew that when I left, Ito would catch hell for it. I also knew that my blackmailing the SDF would also damage the entire group. I just hoped that I was not the reason he was drummed out of the service. Looking back at Tigger, she saw I had finished my train of thought and continued, "Two years ago he was killed by members of Echo Team. He had been hired to act as a guard for a high level Australian businessman. Echo team took out him and their target." Pushing the box back towards me, "He had no family. He was the last of his line. If you know how to use those things, then take them and avenge him."

Opening the box, I again withdrew the Katana. It had been almost twenty years since I had held one. I still sparred with Kendo sticks occasionally, but it's not the same thing.



## Chapter 40

Drawing the sword from the scabbard, I placed the scabbard on the table and walked out to the center of the room. Taking a deep breath to center myself, I began an exercise routine. Hesitantly at first, I began making the sweeping motions, lunges and parries. As I continued through the routine though, it all began to come back. Quickening the pace, I began to move through the motions at full speed, the blade whistling as it sliced the air. By the time I was done with the third set of the routine, the sword felt at home in my hand. Its balance was perfect, the blade an extension of my arm.

Placing the sword back in the scabbard, I then replaced it in the case. Looking at Tigger, I panted slightly with the exertion, "Thank you. You have honored me with such a gift. I shall try to prove myself worthy." I told her gravely. Nodding, Tigger began to disassemble an MP5 that was in front of her. "Just kill as many of the bastards as you can before they get us. Do that, and Hikaru will consider the debt paid in full." She replied curtly.

Picking up an SD5, I began to disassemble and inspect it; all while visions of baptizing the Katana in the blood of my enemies ran around in the back of my head.

# Chapter 41

A rude awakening.

Tigger had helped me to dye my fur matte black. Adding splotches of dark brown intermingled with stripes of gray, the pattern helped to break up my profile in the shadows. Now I didn't look like a walking target. Lending her a hand, we re-did the dye job that she was wearing using a similar combination of colors and patterns.

Zig Zag had timidly come out of the room to see what we were doing. Once she caught on, she tried to help out some, though she still gave me a wide berth. I gave her credit for trying.

I don't know where Tigger got it from, but she had a set of ballistic combat armor that was actually too big for me. Looking through all the stuff that she had in the footlockers, I'd say she had the equipment for a small tactical unit. When I queried her on this, she just smiled and went back to work.

Camouflaged, equipped and armored, I sat in the corner to meditate on the coming assault. Tigger had suggested that we go after Khansman. He was their money and without him, they might break it off. Sounded good to me. I had a bone to pick with this guy. Adjusting the Katana and Wakazashi on my back I closed my eyes and turned inward.

Approaching the barrier, I tried to push my way through. Although it gave like plastic, I couldn't penetrate. There was resistance on the other side. Giving a roar, I yelled, "Let me pass." From around me, a voice answered, "Accept the geas." It was the voice of the dragon. Raising the middle finger on my paw, "No! No geas. I'm not you're slave. On my terms, or not at all." I yelled. The barrier before me became solid as rock. "Then you may not pass," declared the dragon.

Leaving the barrier, I found my center and began trying to relax. I was angry from my confrontation with the dragon, and I didn't want to burn out before we were ready to go.

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Hearing the perimeter alarm, I broke out of my meditation and approached the monitors. Checking the cameras in the building, I saw Tigger climbing the stairs. Switching to the stair-top camera, I saw her give me the pre-arranged signal indicating no problems. Deactivating the security system on the door, I moved over to the edge of the partition, covering the door with the MP5. Glancing back at the monitor as Tigger unlocked the door, I verified that nobody was coming up the stairs after her. Once she was inside, I reactivated the security system.

Joining her at the table, I watched as she spread out the documents she had just picked up. Unfolding one of the maps, she put it in the center. Curious, Zig Zag came over and joined us. "This is the layout of the subdivision that he lives in. It's a gated community with armed patrolling units that run in a varied pattern," Tigger explained, pointing out the entrances. "The walls are topped with razor wire. Behind them is a row of coniferous fur trees to block the 'unsightly wall.' Beyond the wall is an open street, well illuminated followed by the front yards of the houses. Each house sits on a one eighth acre lot. Some are surrounded by hedges others are fairly open." She continued, documenting the design

of the complex. Pointing to a house deep inside the perimeter, "This is Khansman's house. I wired it up about a week ago. I can activate or deactivate the security system in his house at will as well as triggering the panic alarms. Before we're ready to penetrate the perimeter, I'll set it off a few times. After about the third or fourth time, security will ignore it."

Taking out another map, Tigger unfolded it. "Here's his house. Fortunately the man likes his privacy so he's got a very high hedgerow. Even the neighbor with a three story can't see below the roofline so we don't have to worry about spectators from anywhere but the front. I have no clue about any security by the neighbors, so we've got to be careful not to trip their alarms." Continuing her description of the house, she pointed out his bedroom, spare room, study and other important parts to the house. Apparently he had a live in with him that took care of the domestics.

Checking her watch, Tigger set the timeline, "It's almost ten o'clock now. If he stays true to form, he's probably at some party letting people brown nose him. Last Friday he didn't get home till almost two AM. Let's hope he keeps this schedule." Looking at Zig Zag, "Are you up to doing some driving?" She asked. Surprised at the question, Zig Zag nodded, "Yes, I think I could do some driving," she stated. Nodding, Tigger handed her a pair of keys, "Bear boy and I are going to be using the van roof to get over the wire. Afterwards you'll have to drive around so as not to raise suspicion. I'll show you how to use a tactical radio headset before we go. You're going to be our backup, so don't screw up, OK?" Watching Zig Zag swallow and nod, Tigger folded up the maps.

Checking her watch, Tigger spoke to Zig and me, "OK, we leave in 10 minutes folks. Take care of any personal needs you have because we won't have time afterwards."

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Zig Zag stopped the van by the security wall. Using fiberglass poles, we placed them over the wall, and then stepping off, shimmied down the pole while they were vertical. Laying them in the grass behind the trees, Tigger tripped the latest panic alarm on the house. Listening on the security company's radio frequency on the B channel of our radio, we heard a bored dispatcher send the local supervisor to Khansman's house. One or two more and they'd just ignore them.

Taking the small backpack I was wearing, I extended the straps and re-arranged it so it was tucked close to my stomach. Putting on a heavy sweatshirt, I looked over at Tigger who was putting on a loose windbreaker. The pack held our two MP5's and the equipment harnesses had all the other equipment we'd need. Pulling a wig on her head, we now looked like a respectable couple out for an evening walk. Turning on our "safety first" flashlights, we began to stroll casually down the street, hand in hand.

Twice patrol cars passed us by with the security personnel returned our waves each time. Arriving at the front of Khansman's house, Tigger used a remote to deactivate the motion sensors outside the house. Casually strolling up to the house, we walked around back and ducked into the utility shed in the backyard. Stripping our outer disguises, we removed the MP5's and placed the clothes in the packs. Pulling on our masks, she

triggered the panic alarm again, this time eliciting no response from the security company.

Approaching the back door, Tigger isolated the remaining sensors from the control panel. Anyone looking at the alarm system would see a live system that tested good, but wasn't actually talking to anything anymore. Watching the perimeter, I waited for Tigger to open the door. Once open, we slipped into the kitchen.

Closing the door behind me, I relocked the deadbolt. Standing there, we heard the sound of the television on in the living room. Signaling me to go check on the living room, Tigger headed for the garage to verify if Khansman's car was here.

Carefully stalking up to the doorway leading to the living room, I made sure to be as quiet as possible, while keeping an eye on the other entrances to the room. Standing next to the doorway, I pulled the Tanto from my belt. Using the blade as a mirror, I scanned the room looking for occupants. The only person in the room was a young, female leopard. Re-sheathing the Tanto, I watched keep an eye on the other entrance to the living room and the dining area I was in.

Waiting on Tigger, I heard her signal in my headset. Khansman's car was not there. This confirmed the telemetry we had gotten earlier. One can never be too careful. Sending an acknowledgement click, I continued to watch the leopard while Tigger cased the rest of the house to make sure nobody else was home.

Seeing Tigger in the other doorway leading to the living room, she gave me the thumbs up. Re-slinging my MP5, I withdrew the Katana and stepped into the room. Walking up behind and to the right of the chair, I reached around and placed the blade on the female's throat. "Don't move, don't scream, don't do ANYTHING and you'll live through the night." I instructed her in a low voice. The scent of her fear permeated the room, and I could see the whites of her eyes as she looked at my masked face.

Lifting up on the blade, I pressed it against the junction of her throat and jaw. "Stand up," I ordered, lifting the blade as she stood. Directing her with the blade, I led her to the center of the room where Tigger proceeded to bind her hands behind her. Once she was secure, we sat her back down in the chair.

Still holding the blade to her throat, I asked, "When will he get home?" Glancing between us, she stuttered out, "W-w-who?" The leopard asked. Sliding the edge lightly against her throat, I was rewarded with a small trickle of blood. "Don't play with us. You know who we want." I told her with a menacing voice. Now crying, the leopard begged, "Please don't kill me. I don't know when he'll be home. Oh god, I never did anything to you people. Please don't hurt me."

Looking at Tigger, I saw her motion me over to her. Wiping the blade of the Katana I put it in its scabbard and followed Tigger a short distance away from the girl. In a conspiratorial whisper, Tigger instructed, "OK. We camp here and wait for Khansman. Close the drapes in here and keep an eye on the candy girl over there. I'll keep an eye on the driveway and inform unit three of the delay. Check in, every 15 minutes."

Going over to the window, I closed the drapes. Reclining on the couch, I got ready for a long wait. Checking my chronograph, I saw that it was only around quarter till twelve.

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At almost one AM, the leopard screwed up the courage to speak, "Hey mister?" She asked. "Yah, what do you want?" I asked back. Squirming in her chair a little, she looked embarrassed, "Um, I need to use the bathroom." Giving a chuckle, I waved to the expensive leather chair she was sitting in, "That looks like a pretty expensive chair." I stated. A look of confusion crossed her face. Smiling behind my mask, "Looks like a good place to me." I quipped. Shooting me a rather indignant look, she pleaded, "Come on mister. Cut me some slack. Please?"

Giving a sigh, I climbed out of the couch and waved for her to stand. Just as I was about to notify Tigger, I heard her on the headset, "Target approaching." Giving an acknowledging click, I ordered the girl back in the chair. Moving to a corner where I wouldn't be seen, I unslung the MP5 and checked to verify there was a round in the chamber.

Hearing him call to the girl, I pointed the submachine gun at her, "Tell him to come here." I whispered. Eyes wide with fear, her voice cracked on the first try, "Danny. Would you come in the living room please?" She yelled nervously. From the kitchen, I heard him yell back, "Just a minute babe." Giving a low growl, I whispered to the girl, "Tell him you have a surprise for him." Holding up a finger, I emphasized what I was saying, "And make sure he believes it." Swallowing, she sang out to Daniel, "I've got a surprise for you Danny. Better hurry." Pleading with her eyes, she relaxed when I gave her the thumbs up.

After a few seconds, Khansman came into the room. Walking up to the chair, he put his arms around the leopard and was about to kiss her when he sensed something wrong. He stood up as I stepped out from around the corner, leveling the machine gun at him. Taking a step backwards, he ran into the muzzle of Tigger's gun. I could hear the glee in her voice, "Hello again, Mr. District Attorney," she said cheerfully.

His ears lay back on his head; he let out a low rumble. Spitting the word out like it was a curse he named his foe, "Tigger." She cooed, "Oh, you remember me. How nice. Why don't you and our lovely switch places? I believe your friend there needed to use the powder room anyway."

Helping his girlfriend up, he sat down in the chair, hands resting on the arms. As I led the girl out to the master bedroom, I heard Tigger chuckle, "Oh, by the way, I wouldn't bother with the panic button on the arm. I think you'll be disappointed with their response time."

Leading the girl back to the bathroom. And using my Tanto to cut the ropes, I leaned against the doorjamb and pointed to the john. Giving me a questioning look she asked, "Don't I get any privacy?" Chuckling, I asked her back, "If you were in my position, would you leave me alone?" Thinking about it for a second, she gave a weak smile and then took care of business.

Leading her back into the living room, I heard Tigger explaining to Daniel the error of his ways. Spotting us, she got up off the couch. "So, are we ready to go? Good." Leading our two hostages out to the garage, we had the girl get in the front of Khansman's car, while the three of us got in the back. Fortunately the side windows were well tinted.

Following Tigger's instructions, the girl backed out and headed for the gate. As we approached, Tigger and I slid down into the floor, still covering Khansman. He had a look on his face I didn't like. He was thinking about being stupid. Placing the muzzle of the MP5 on the edge of the seat between his legs, I stated, "Pull something stupid, and you'll live to regret it. However, you'll never have to worry about birth control again." I said in a low, threatening voice. Glancing at Tigger, I saw her laughing quietly to herself while shaking her head. The way Khansman was glaring at me as well as Tigger who was laughing; I'd say I'd won points with both of them.

Leaving the gatehouse, we drove towards the west side of town. Tigger had a location picked up for the exchange. It was going to be a large, open field where we could see the only approaches. En route, Tigger had Khansman call Echo Team on his cell phone. At first he tried to deny, but after we explained that he'd be of no use to us if he didn't, he changed his mind.

Taking his cell phone out, he dialed a number, "This is Khansman." He said. Before he could continue, Tigger took the phone from him, "Hello Bucky... That's right Bucky... You broke the rules Bucky, and you know how I get when you do that... What do you mean how? You brought innocent third parties into the dispute... Yes, the otter and the vixen. Kidnapping them was sloppy Bucky. You're slipping if you have to resort to that kind of crap... Khansman isn't an innocent; he's paying for this. Besides, if I decide to off him, you lose your funding for the project. You still going to play the game with no cash behind it?... I didn't think so. How about I give you a chance to earn a bonus... That's right, I'll take a trade... You're boss and his squeeze for the two you're holding... Only two of you and the hostages in the vehicle. If I see a third person, I'll pop Khansman personally... " Continuing the conversation she gave directions for the meeting, giving them only forty five minutes to get there. They would have no way of setting up an ambush. We, however, would have plenty of time.

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Pulling up next to the van at the top of the hill, we climbed out with our hostages. Blindfolding them, Tigger lead them around to the back of the car and sat them down.

Walking over to the van, I checked on Zig Zag. She was wearing a black body stocking similar to what Tigger had on, including weapons harness. As I adjusted the harness, attaching missing equipment, I heard Zig say in a quiet voice, "I'm not sure I can go through with this." Stopping, I took her face in my hand, "Don't freak out on us now. Bjorn and Sheila's life depend on your being able to do this. There's no way we can pull this off without you." I explained calmly. Giving me a look that begged me, she pleaded, "But why? I don't understand why I have to carry one of those guns." Taking a deep breath, I centered myself; "They have to see Tigger, or someone they think is Tigger for this to work. There's no doubt they're going to try to drop a sniper somewhere that can take us out after the exchange. Tigger won't be able to hunt them if she's not standing

next to the hostages. That's why we need you. Dressed like this, they'll probably mistake you for Tigger." "But do I have to carry these guns?" she pleaded again.

Picking up the MP5 from the floor of the van, I held it out, "You were willing to shoot your father because he was going to kill your mom. Are you telling me now that you can't... no won't pick up a gun again to help save the lives of Bjorn and Sheila? If we don't pull this off, nobody will walk away, especially them."

Thrusting the submachine gun into her hands I was rewarded by the fact that she didn't drop it. Hesitantly she drew the strap over her shoulder. Adjusting the strap for the proper length, I set the weapon on three round burst. Showing her where the safety was, I stated, "When they come, flip this up. Until then, it's as safe as a rock." Accepting her nod, I took her shoulder and turned her around.

Grabbing her tail, I began to matt the fur down. "What are you doing?" she demanded. Laughing, I explained, wrapping the tail with a black cloth, "Lady, you have a tail that would be recognized in twenty seven countries. Don't you think it would be a good idea to disguise it?" I asked. It was the little details that would get you killed. Last thing I wanted was ZZ to be recognized by anyone.

Finishing up, I swapped my MP5 for an M16 Carbine that was in the van. Exchanging the 9MM clips for 5.56mm NATO rounds, I was prepared. This rifle had a small scope, and would be much more accurate at longer distances than the MP5 was.

Walking back to the car, I relieved Tigger of the prisoners. Climbing into the van, she headed off to a nearby abandoned barn that would place Echo Team between her and us. It was probable that someone from ET would try to use it for the same purpose, all the better reason for us to claim it for ourselves.

Now all we had to do was wait. Checking my watch, I saw it was T minus fifteen minutes and counting.

# Chapter 42

Kill them all and let God sort them out.

Michael Jones had just gotten what had to count as the strangest call of his life. Arden had called his cell phone and given him directions to a rural farm. The last part was the most disturbing. Come alone and be prepared for a firefight.

He didn't have a clue as to what was going on, but the bear sounded deadly serious. He was about to call in every chip he had with the boys in SWAT and probably have to hand out a few to top it off.

Hurrying to the armory, he made a mental list of equipment he'd want.

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"Target inbound. Old four door Ford POS. Four occupants," I heard Tigger say over the headset. Waving to Zig Zag, I said, "Show time." Helping our captives up, we walked over to the top of the hill and watched the car approach.

As they stopped at the bottom of the hill, I saw two very large wolves get out, one from the front and the other from the back. They were wearing combat body armor just like we were. Opening the other doors, they hauled Bjorn and Sheila out. Using the scope on the rifle, I verified that they appeared to be unharmed.

Looking at Zig Zag's MP5, I saw the safety was still on. Reaching over, I flipped it off and chambered a round. Her eyes wide, she looked at the gun and then me. Nodding, I returned my attention to what was going on before us.

As they closed the distance the full harvest moon illuminated the scene eerily, allowing all of us a good solid look at each other. When they were about 30 meters away, I yelled, "That's far enough." Stopping, one of them called out, "So how do we do this? One at a time, or simultaneous?" He asked. Removing the blindfolds from Khansman and the leopard, I let them take a look around. "You'll send the two actors over here. Once I'm satisfied that they're safe, I'll send your boy and his girl down to you." I explained. Laughing, he yelled back, "Just what the hell makes you think I'm going to do something like that?"

Good question. Hitting the radio, "Got anyone yet?" I asked. "Negative. They didn't drop anyone off, and I show nothing on IR. They're alone." Tigger stated.

"All right," I agreed, "The women first." Putting my hand on the back of the leopard, I gave her a small push, "Go ahead, but if I yell freeze, you stop in your tracks." I ordered. Marching away slowly, I saw Sheila moving away from the two mercenaries.

As they approached mid-point, I could hear the rattle of the equipment harness as Zig Zag began shaking. Speaking without turning my head, I told her, "Take it easy. Everything is going according to plan. They want Khansman more than they want Sheila or Bjorn." Still hearing her shake, I barked, "Don't screw this up. Just take a deep breath and hold it for a few seconds, then let it out. Do that a couple of times, it will calm you down." I instructed her. Listening, I could hear her take a deep breath, hold it, then release it. She was calmer by the time Sheila reached us.



As Sheila reached us, Zig Zag motioned her to follow her up to the car. Once they were over the hill, I tapped Khansman. "You should feel honored. It's not often Tigger calls in help. I'd like to make a suggestion to you: Quit while you're still alive." Giving him a rough push, I brought the rifle up to my shoulder and tracked him. Biting down on the mike switch, I told Tigger, "Alpha package en route." As I watched him walk, I saw Bjorn limping towards us. As they reached the mid point, Tigger came back, "Nobody on the ground. Something's very wrong. This is too easy. Keep your eyes open," she instructed. Targeting the two wolves, I responded, "Affirmative, I've got the guy on my left targeted. You target the right. If they try anything, I'll key off of your shot." Hearing her click acknowledgement, I felt the adrenaline really start to kick in despite my attempts to prevent it.

As Bjorn reached me, I saw the terror in his eyes. He looked like a hunted animal. He had no clue who I was. "Over the hill is a car. Get to it fast. You'll find Sheila there." Staring at me, he had a shocked look on his face, "Move it shorty, or I'll leave you behind." I barked at him. Overcoming his fear, he quickly raced up the hill, limping all the way.

Continuing to watch the two wolves, I saw them returning with Khansman to the car. As they had almost reached the bottom, I heard Tigger on the radio, "Helicopter inbound. Take the shot?" Damn, with a helicopter there was no way we could evade them, "Roger, take 'em out!" Slowly exhaling, I saw the head on the wolf to the right explode. The one on the left froze for a second, then grabbed for Khansman. Squeezing the trigger, I was pleased to see my target's head snap forward, followed by his body. Khansman stood there stunned. As I was about to bracket him, a spotlight illuminated the area around me.

Diving to the side, I narrowly avoided a burst of .30 caliber machinegun fire. Continuing to roll towards the helicopter, I sprang to my feet, running in a zigzag pattern, sniping at the light as I ran. Hearing the boom of Tigger's .50 caliber sniper rifle I was plunged into darkness as she hit the spotlight. Now partially blinded, I simply dodged towards the sound of the helicopter.

"He's peeling off; head back for the car." I heard Tigger order. Sliding to a halt, I determined which way was up hill and began running for the top. "Zig Zag, if you see that damned helicopter, let us know." I said into the microphone.

As I neared the top, I could hear the helicopter coming in fast from the side. Blinking, I looked for the silhouette against the stars, but everything was still too dark. Before I could reach the top, I saw the muzzle flashes from the .30 caliber again as it strafed the car and surrounding area. Stopping, I flipped my gun to three round burst and began trying to lead the muzzle flashes. My night sight was totally shot, and I couldn't see if I was even coming close.

Flying on, the helicopter swung out wide for another pass. Getting to the top, I saw Bjorn on the ground; Sheila and Zig Zag were standing over him. Grabbing both of them, I hauled them away from the car, yelling "Run for the tree line, now!" Sheila tried to run back up. Grabbing her arm, I threw her down the hill. "Damn it! I'll get Bjorn, you just run," I ordered, shoving Zig Zag towards Sheila.

Turning back up, I heard Tigger, "They're moving too fast. I can't target them. You need to get to cover," she informed me. Clicking the mike, "I'm making a pickup, let me know ETA on return," I replied. Getting to the top, I reached down for Bjorn. Hauling him up into a fireman's carry and turned from the car. Behind me I heard the whooshing sound of unguided rockets.

Time began to slow down for me. I knew I was going to be in the kill zone. Looking behind me, I saw the stream of rockets come flying from the pods underneath the helicopter headed for the car. Diving away, I was struck in the air by the force of the explosion behind me. Flying in an uncontrolled dive, Bjorn's body flew from my grip. Landing hard, I had the wind knocked from me.

Stunned, I watched the outline of the helicopter as it passed over in slow motion. Shaking my head, I rolled over and looked for Bjorn. Spotting him a few feet away, I crawled over to where he lay. When I reached him, I saw that he lay face down in the grass, unmoving. A large chunk of metal from the car was imbedded in his back.

They had killed one of my objectives. They had killed Bjorn. Even as I thought this, a small part of my mind was screaming at me, "He's more than an objective. He's a friend." Startled, I realized that with all that had happened today, I hadn't been worried about Sheila as a friend or lover, but simply because she was my objective. Even as that realization hit me, another part of my mind clamped down on it. I had a mission. I was hunted, and they needed to die.

Looking around for my carbine, I saw it laying in a twisted mess where I had landed on it. It was of no use to me anymore. Drawing the Desert Eagle, I chambered a round. Searching for the sky, I could hear the helicopter circling, but couldn't see it.

In my mind I heard the Dragon, "Accept the geas and you will have my eyes." He wouldn't let up would he? "No geas. You need me alive. Give me the sight," I demanded. The Dragon growled, "Not without the geas. You will perform the task or you are useless to us." Off behind me, near the base of the hill, I heard the sound of the machine gun strafing Zig Zag and Sheila. "All right damn it! I'll do your quest. But you've got to grant me everything. No piecemeal shit!" I demanded in return. The Dragon chuckled, "You can't handle all of our power even if we could give it to you," he answered. Firing at the helicopter with the pistol, I tried to draw their fire. "Fine," I replied. "Give me all that I can handle and not an ounce less and I'll do your damned quest!"

"DONE!" echoed through my head as my body exploded with fire. Falling to my knees, I felt every bone, every fiber of my body changing, surging with the energy he poured into me. Finally, the torment ended. Dropping to my front paws, I took a deep breath. The world around me was alive with brilliant colors. I could hear the helicopter circling around for another pass. Turning my head, I saw it illuminated by the heat of the engine against the cold night air. I could see the pilot was planning on circling the hill again to make another pass.

Holstering the pistol, I stood and removed a fragmentation grenade. Pulling the pin, I waited for him to circle further around the hill. As the helicopter came back into sight, I

released the spoon and began counting. I could smell and hear the fuse burning down. Reaching the count of three, I began running towards my planned intersect point. As my count reached six, I threw the grenade in a high arc towards the path of the helicopter. I had misjudged slightly, as it detonated too soon. Still it had the desired effect of deflecting the pilot from his run.

Turning I ran up the hill towards the burning car. I would make a target for him. In my ear, I could hear Tigger demanding to know what I was doing. Keying my mike, I replied, "I'm going up to the top of the hill. I'm going to give them an easy target. If I'm right, he's going to fly straight for me. That will give you your shot. Don't miss," I ordered her.

Reaching the burning car, I drew the pistol again. Ejecting the clip, I loaded a new one. A smile came to my face as I remembered a scene in the movie Patton where he had faced down an airborne attacker with a pistol. Watching the helicopter I saw the side gunner spot me, yelling frantically to the pilot. The helicopter banked hard towards me, coming in on a straight line. "Please don't miss your shot, Tigger," I said to myself as I moved to the far side of the vehicle. Hopefully the car would provide some cover.

Raising the pistol, I aimed high on the helicopter. Kneeling down behind the engine compartment, I steadied the gun. As he got within one hundred meters, he sideslipped to give his gunner a shot. Firing the pistol at the gunner, I watched as the bullets dropped from the down wash of the rotor. Adjusting my aim, I watched him as he began firing. I could hear the bullets hitting the metal of the car as well as the ground behind me, but none struck me. It appears my patron *was* a luck dragon. Firing again, I was rewarded by the sight of the gunner rocking back in the doorway as the last round of my clip was expended.

Ejecting the clip, I slapped a new one home and chambered the round just as the helicopter was about to pass over. Turning to aim over the car, I was rewarded by the boom of Tigger's rifle. Looking up at the helicopter, I saw the transmission for the main rotor come apart in a violent shower of parts and sparks. Smoke billowed as the helicopter dropped towards the ground while the pilot attempted to auto-rotate. Only his forward momentum gave him any hope of doing it.

Heading around the car, I began to run down the hill towards where the helicopter had crash-landed. Lying on its side, I saw smoke pour out from the passenger compartment. Holstering the pistol again, I drew the Katana. Anyone climbing out of that bird was going to be cat food. When I was about fifty meters from the bird, I saw the form of a tall bear getting out of the passenger compartment. Falling to the ground, he got shakily to his feet.

Spotting me, he tried to pull his pistol, but it was too late. Freezing as I pressed the Katana against his neck, he slowly took the weapon and threw it away. Looking at his uniform I saw oak leaves. This was the guy in charge.

The bear gave a combination growl and snarl. "So, this is your idea of a fair fight?" he asked. I couldn't believe what he was saying. "And strafing unarmed civilians is I

suppose?" I challenged him back. I had been ignoring his left hand. It was almost to the combat knife in his boot.

"They were our targets." He answered. Shaking my head, I disagreed, "No, I was your target. Bjorn and Sheila had nothing to do with this." Hearing this, his eyes narrowed. He now knew who faced him. Blocking the sword away from his throat, he drew the knife and lunged. Ready for this, I spun, using my other arm to deflect the attack. Continuing the spin, I took his head. Stepping back, I looked down on the body and spit. Officers never did have any sense.

Leaping up onto the tail, I walked forwards and looked into the interior. The gunner I had shot was pinned by his weapon. The pilot was struggling to get out of their harnesses. Spotting me, the gunner started to shout out a warning, but it was cut short as I dropped on him, snapping his neck as I landed on it.

Turning I saw the pilot had gotten loose and dropped down onto the left seat. Drawing his weapon he brought it up, trying to aim it at me. Dodging in the limited space available, I felt two hits to the chest as I charged him. Slashing with the sword, I took his paw. Lunging, I drove it through his chest, between the ribs, piercing his heart.

Pulling the sword free, I stepped forward and checked the co-pilot. He was still alive. Preparing to terminate him also, I froze. What the hell was I doing? He wasn't a threat. The guy had taken a hard hit to the head as the helicopter had rolled. Yet something inside me screamed to kill him. As I fought my internal battle, I saw his eyes flutter and open. Groggily, he looked up at me. Seeing the blade poised over his face, he stared at me. His face neutral, he waited for me to strike.

I don't know how long I stood there, staring at him. I had killed hundreds, but I couldn't kill him. He wasn't a threat. Relaxing, I wiped the blade on the pilot's uniform and re-sheathed the sword in its scabbard. Disarming the ferret, I then cut him loose of the restraining harness. Pulling him out into the passenger area, I heaved him up onto the edge of the cabin. Climbing up myself, I sat on the side of the helicopter and tried to raise Tigger.

Not getting a response, I looked down and saw that my radio equipment had been smashed. It must have taken a hit from the machinegun when they strafed me. Checking myself over, I saw that the bear's blade had sliced my arm. It also looked like my vest had caught the two shots I took from the pilot. Reaching in, I felt blood. Strange thing is, there was no pain.

The guy on the edge of the skid let out a moan, reminding me where I was. Standing up, I reached down and hauled the injured ferret to his feet. Slinging him over my shoulder, I walked down the tail and jumped off into the grass. Leaving the scene of the crash, I made my way over to where I saw Zig Zag and Sheila. They were crouched over the body of Bjorn.

Setting the Ferret on the ground, I saw Zig Zag turn. She had taken her mask off, and I could see the murderous intent on her face as she raised the submachine gun. Stepping between her and the mercenary, I blocked her shot. Bearing her teeth, she snarled at me,

"How can you protect him after what he and the others have done!" Taking the barrel of the gun, I raised it so it pointed at my head, "And what about me?" I asked. "Who will avenge all the people I've killed?" That took her aback. "He's defenseless. He's injured. Killing him now is without honor. Killing him now will make you a murderer," I said, trying to reason with her, "You are defending nobody here."

Slowly she released the gun. Taking it, I set the safety and slung it over my shoulder. Kneeling down by Bjorn, I looked at the little guy. Even if he hadn't been hit with the metal, the stitch line of bullets running up his body would have spelled death.

Sobbing with despair, Sheila yelled at me, "What's wrong with you!" Looking up at her, I saw the tears streaming down her face, "How can you sit there like that when he killed Bjorn! What's the matter with you? Don't you care about anyone but yourself?" She demanded of me.

Standing, I looked at Zig Zag. I could see the same question written on her face. What the hell was happening to me? Why didn't I feel anything? On a mission, I would subdue my emotions, but this was crazy. It was like I didn't have any.

In a daze I stumbled a short distance away and sat down. The sound of an approaching engine caught my attention as Tigger drove up in the van, skidding to a stop mere feet from Bjorn's body; the headlights illuminated the grisly sight.

Feeling the strength fade from my body as the adrenaline ran out, I closed my eyes and lay back on the cool grass. I heard Tigger climb out and check on the others. Seeing Bjorn, she cursed. Listening to the conversation, I heard her do what I could not. She tried to comfort Sheila, promising that they would all pay for their crime. Why couldn't I do that? The hunt was over. Why couldn't I remove the mask?

Standing up, Tigger walked over to me. Shining a light over me, she cursed seeing the damage to my vest. I was too exhausted to even protest my health. Ripping open the armor she saw the mass of blood on my chest. Yelling to Zig Zag, she ordered her to get the medical kit out of the van. Cracking my eyes open, I could see the confusion on her face as she tried to find where the blood had come from. Brushing the lead out of my fur, she knew that there was no way that the armor could have protected me.

Shining a light in my face, Tigger got a good look at my eyes. Slipping in the grass, she crawled backwards from me. "What the hell are you?" She demanded. Thinking quickly, I tried to come up with an answer, "I'm a half-breed." Getting control, Tigger once again shined the light on me, approaching closer, "Half-breed, all right. I can buy that. Obviously you're half bear. But what's the other half?" She inquired. Fighting to stay awake, I laid my head back. "Dragon," I managed to get out before the darkness took me.

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A sharp pain in my ear had rudely awaked me. Tigger had used a claw to wake me up. I saw that Detective Jones was there. "Come on, sleeping beauty, time to go," Tigger ordered me. With no small amount of assistance, I made it to my feet. I hurt all over. Looking down, I saw that my chest and arm had been bandaged. Looking over, I saw Sheila still sitting next to Bjorn, his body now covered by a tarp.

## Chapter 42

As Tigger lead me over to the van, I asked, "How will Sheila explain all this?" Tigger explained, helping me into the back of the van, "She's going to say she had no idea who did it. We're going to clean you up and drop you two off at James Sheppard's place."

On the bench seat I saw Zig Zag sitting, ears hanging low, crying. Hearing Tigger close the door, I reached out to touch Zig Zag. Turning at my touch, I could see the grief on her face at the loss of Bjorn. I remember grief. I once felt it. But now there was nothing.

Sliding over to Zig Zag, I remembered the other times I had comforted her or Sheila. Trying to force an emotion of sorrow on my face, I gently reached out to Zig Zag and pulled her close to me. Speaking softly, I parroted the words I had heard so often, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," as she cried softly into my shoulder.

Somewhere, trapped within me, was that part of my soul that would let me feel again. Somehow, I had to reclaim that part of me.

# Chapter 43

Never make a deal with a dragon.

Arriving at James's house, I helped Zig Zag out of the van. Sniffling, she wiped her nose on the body stocking she wore. "Wait here, I'll go unlock the door," she instructed us.

Leaning against the front of the van, Tigger waited for her to get out of sight. "Tell me this. Was there a large, black bear there?" She asked. Remembering my first kill at the helicopter, I nodded. "How did he die?" She demanded of me. Describing his demise, I saw her nod. "It was too quick. He needed to suffer," she stated venomously. "But at least he's dead." Putting her hand on my shoulder, she looked me in the eyes. "You've avenged Ito's death. Thank you."

Not knowing how to respond, I simply nodded. Narrowing her eyes at me, she demanded, "You can't break out of it can you?" It took me a second to realize what she was talking about. "No," I answered her. "I don't understand it. It's like I'm completely dead inside. It's never been like this. I've never been unable to drop the mask."

Stepping back from me, she drew her pistol. "I'm sorry. You've been a good partner, but I can't leave you like this. You're a danger to everyone around you," she explained. Digesting this, I nodded and pulled the body armor open so as to give her a clean shot. "Thank you. I don't know that I'd want to keep going like this... unable to feel." As she took careful aim at my heart, we were interrupted by the sound of the front door opening.

Seeing what was happening, Zig Zag screamed, "NO!" and charged Tigger. Pivoting, Tigger redirected the skunk's momentum so that she lost her balance and fell. Scrambling to her feet, Zig Zag lunged in front of me, blocking the shot. "I won't let you do this!" she screamed. Putting a hand on her shoulder, I turned her around. "This has to be done, Zig Zag. I can't break out of the killing mindset. I'm a danger to you and everyone around me." I explained calmly. Crying again, she grabbed my fur, "No! I won't allow it! Damn it, Arden, I can't afford to lose someone else. Please," she pleaded, "I don't know if I could take both of you dying today."

Sobbing, she wrapped her arms around me, crying against my chest. Looking at Tigger, I saw the pistol aimed at my head. Wrapping my arms around Zig Zag in an embrace, I laid my head on top of hers. Smelling the salt in her tears, a voice within my mind cried out and then I felt the barrier shatter and crumble. The emotions, which had been held behind the wall, hit me with a flood. The fear, the anger and the pain all conspired to overwhelm me. Finally came the grief of Bjorn's death. He had been a rival for Sheila's affection, but he didn't deserve to die. The thought of what Sheila must be going through was too much for me. Lifting my head to the sky, I roared my anger, frustration and sadness to the world, tears streaming down my face. Burying my face in her hair, we stood together, mourning our loss.

Tigger, seeing my reaction, un-cocked the pistol and placed it back in her holster. After a few minutes, she interrupted us. "Look, I can understand your feelings right now, but we need to get off the street," she directed. Nodding to her, I led Zig Zag into the house. As we passed the door, Tigger stopped us. "I've got to go," she explained. "There's still unfinished business to take care of. I've got some documentation I want to get to your detective friend before I leave town."

Nodding, I reached out my paw. "It's been an honor working with you, Tigger," I informed her, shaking her hand. Smiling, she gave my paw a squeeze. "Diane," she corrected me. Smiling my own smile, "Thank you, Diane. I'm in your debt. If you ever need my help..." I said, allowing the offer to trail off. Laughing, she released my hand. "Sorry, but I'm a loner." Slowly, her face changed, and she got a wistful look. "Then again, one can never tell," she stated quietly.

Turning, she walked back to the van and climbed in. Starting it up, she took another good look at me before turning on the lights and backing out of the driveway. Listening to her drive off, I shut the door.

Leading Zig Zag back to the bedroom, I caught sight of the time on a clock. It was almost four in the morning.

Leaving Zig Zag at the doorway to clean herself up, I walked to James's study. Picking up the phone, I dialed Zig Zag's house. On the second ring, I heard the frantic voice of James on the phone. Calming him down, I assured him that Zig Zag and I were all right and that we were at his house. Hearing him declare that he was coming home, I emphasized that he should take it easy. We were both all right and that the last thing Zig Zag needed was to find out he had been in a car wreck.

Hanging up the phone, I leaned back in the chair. I felt old. I had spent so many years of my life trying to forget how to kill. Today, I had not only killed, but I reveled in the blood I had spilled. In my mind I played over the scenes where I slaughtered my opponents. I had been intoxicated with the Dragon's power and had taken on the worst of all his traits: blood lust.

Searching the drawers of the desk, I looked for the bottle I knew James kept there. There wasn't one. I guess he had learned from his binges. Just my luck the guy would wise up right when I could use a drink.

The noise of me banging around in the desk brought Zig Zag. Looking at the expression on my face, she came over to me. "Are you going to be all right Arden?" she asked, worried. Nodding, I let out a sigh of exasperation, "Yah. I'm just pissed that your boyfriend had the bad timing to go on the wagon just when I could use a drink."

Giving a small chuckle, Zig Zag walked out of the room, to return a few minutes later with a couple of small glasses and a bottle of Bourbon. Setting them on the desk, she pulled up the chair opposite of me. "He didn't go on the wagon, he just didn't bother to restock the desk," she explained with a weak smile.

Filling our glasses half way, she shoved one over to me. Lifting her glass up in a toast, she waited for me to do the same. Leaning forward I picked up the glass and held it up by hers. Clinking them together, she declared, "To the good guys."

Knocking back the oversized shot, I took a deep breath. It was good bourbon. Taking the bottle, I filled the glasses to the half way mark again. Picking mine up, I looked at the liquor inside. "To good friends, both with us and gone." I said quietly. Looking up at Zig Zag, I held the glass out. Her mouth reflecting the quiver in her voice, she held her glass



up also. "To Bjorn." She said quietly. "To Bjorn," I agreed. Clinking the glasses again, we downed the shots.

Sitting there, looking at our glasses, we were both lost in our own memories and thoughts of the recent events. Eventually I took the cap and put it back on the bottle. This wasn't the time to get smashed. We still undoubtedly had to deal with the cops. Reminded of that fact, I thought about the dye job on my fur.

Putting the bottle in the desk, I stood up. Placing my paw on Zig Zag's shoulder, I gave it a gentle squeeze. "I need to take a shower. I've got to get rid of this dye job and blood." I explained. Pressing her back down in the chair as she tried to rise, I shook my head. "No. You stay here. I can do it myself. Besides, James will be here soon, and I don't think he'd appreciate finding me in the shower with you," I explained with a laugh. Giving me a nod, she patted my hand.

As I started to walk away to the shower, I was busy trying to think about where I was going to get some clothes. Somehow I couldn't see the cops not commenting on the fact I was wearing a combat body stocking that was torn and riddled with holes. For some reason, I just knew they'd be suspicious.

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Climbing out of the shower, I felt one hundred percent better. Despite my confidence, shampooing that crap out of my fur was a real job. It had taken four wash jobs, and even then there was a hint of brown in the fur. That's what you get for dying a fur that naturally has no pigment of its own.

Drying off, I walked over to the to the mirror. I had found that with or without my glasses, I could see equally well. My eyes still had the look of the dragon. Black vertical slits on an iris of yellow set against the blood red of the orb. I had tried to release the power I had borrowed, but found that I could not. This was the Dragon's unsubtle way of reminding me I had a mission. I wouldn't be able to function in public without masking my eyes.

Looking down at my chest, I saw holes in my fur from where I had been shot by the pilot. Leaning closer, I could see that they not only were stitched shut but that they had healed over. Looking down, I grabbed the fur so that I could see it better. It wasn't so much a scar, as a light scaled pattern where the hole had healed over. 'Dragons regenerate,' he had told me. By demanding all they could give me, I had been changed more than I had realized.

Pulling on the body stocking, I stopped when it was at my waist. Tying the arms around me like a belt, I treated it like a jumpsuit being worn at half-mast. Picking up the body armor, boots, weapons harness and swords, I walked back out into the hall. Listening, I could hear James' car as it pulled into the driveway. I also heard the gentle sound of Zig Zag sleeping in the bedroom.

Going into the bedroom, I laid my equipment on the bed. Taking the armor, I slipped it on like a casual vest just in case James went ballistic, literally. Walking over to Zig Zag, I

shook her gently. "James is home," I told her quietly as she woke up. Nodding, she sat up, and began to rub her eyes.

Hearing the front door open, I stood and went to the doorway. Hearing James call out for Zig Zag, I called back to him that we were in the bedroom. Watching as he came around the corner and ran down the hall, I got out of his way.

Running past me, he shot me an odd look. Seeing Zig Zag sitting on the bed, he ignored me and went to her. "Jesus, Zigs, are you ok? I was worried sick when you disappeared." James said to her in anxiously. Bursting into tears, Zig Zag just grabbed onto James and began crying again. Shooting me a hard glare, James held onto her tightly. Unable to defend myself, I just stood there and hung my head.

After a few moments, the phone began to ring. Seeing that James was tied up, I walked over and answered it. "Sheppard residence." I said. I heard Detective Jones on the other end. "Is this Arden?" he inquired. "Yes, it is," I answered. I had been waiting on this phone call. "Do you know if Zig Zag and James Sheppard are there also?" he asked. Playing my part, I answered, "Yes. Zig Zag and James are both here." "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but as you are aware, Sheila Vixen and Bjorn Ottersman were kidnapped early yesterday afternoon." He stated. Grunting acknowledgement, I listened to him continue. "At approximately two AM this morning, there was a firefight at a rural farm between the kidnappers and some unknown group." He stated. Gasping, I feigned surprise and concern, "My god. Are they OK? Was anyone hurt?" I asked with urgency. "Miss Vixen is fine, though she's taken a terrible emotional shock. Her *fiancé*, Mr. Ottersman, was killed in the incident."

Her fiancé? The shock of the word stuck me like a physical blow. Dizzy, I leaned back against the wall as I tried to get a grip on my emotions. Bjorn must have proposed to her at lunch. They hadn't even had time to enjoy the moment before they were kidnapped.

I could hear the voice on the phone talking. Bringing it back up to my ear, I could hear Jones asking if everything was all right. Choking back a sob, I answered, "Yes. I'm ok. What do you need us to do?" "Miss Vixen needs someone to pick her up. Also I don't think she should be alone for the next couple of days," he explained. Nodding to the phone, I thanked him and then with some trouble, managed to put it back in the cradle. Sliding down against the wall, I allowed my legs to collapse until I was seated.

Looking up, I saw James and Zig Zag looking at me. Fighting with my emotions, I managed to croak out, "At about two AM, there was a firefight between the kidnappers and some unknown agents." James's eyes got wide at the news. Zig Zag had a curious look, not understanding my reaction. Looking at Zig Zag, I explained, "Although Sheila was not harmed, her *fiancé*, Bjorn, was killed."

Hearing this, she suddenly realized what I had said. As the same thoughts passed through her head, I saw her tremble, then began crying. Leaning my head back against the wall, I closed my eyes, crying. Once again I mourned Bjorn, but this time for an entirely different reason.

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Sitting in the back of the car, I filled James in on our conspiracy of silence. Watching James as he digested the information, I wasn't at all surprised by his response. "Just give me one reason I shouldn't turn you over to the cops." He demanded. I saw Zig Zag shoot him a hard look. "Well, the simple fact that Zig Zag participated makes her an accessory to the fact," I responded with an idle threat. "I'd never squeal on her, but it wouldn't be too difficult for the cops to make the connection."

"And because you decided to take the law into your own hands, Bjorn is dead," James said, accusing me. Glad that my weapons were in the trunk, I fought the urge to strangle him. Continuing with his tirade, "You could have called the cops. Let them handle it. But no, you had to be Mr. Big Shot, didn't you." Shaking my head, I relaxed. He really didn't have a clue. "I don't think you understand, James. These aren't some nickel and dime hoods, these are professional mercenaries. They have been responsible for assassinating very important people all over the world, doing so despite security measures that would make the police look like keystone cops," I explained. "And, I might add, they've NEVER been caught. The authorities never even got close. The only reason we were able to flush them out is that we had their money man."

Rubbing my face with my hands, I conceded, "Our one mistake was underestimating them. We had no idea they had a combat-ready helicopter. If we had, trust me that I would have been prepared to handle the situation." Listening to the pregnant silence, I pleaded with James, "There's no way I can make this up to anyone, especially not Bjorn. But I want you to realize, these guys would have killed him and Sheila anyway. Tigger's been going head to head with these guys for years. I had no reason to doubt her when she said they would kill them regardless of what happened."

Sitting in silence, I waited for us to get to the park where we left Zig Zag's rental car. Not only did it have my clothes in it, but also it would allow me to drive Sheila home.

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Parking in front of the station, I got out and leaned on the car. Seeing this, James and Zig Zag came over. "Aren't you coming in?" James asked. Shaking my head, I explained, "Last time Sheila saw me, she saw a cold blooded killer. I was an absolute, emotionless tactical combat weapon. Seeing her holding Bjorn's body in her lap, I couldn't feel anything and she knew it," I explained. "I'll wait out here. I can't risk her blurting anything out in there that would let our little secret out."

Nodding, he took Zig Zag by the shoulder and led her into the building. Looking at the rising sun as it peeked over the buildings, I put on the sunglasses I had taken from the assassin. No sense in scaring the children.

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Sitting in the chair by Detective Jones's desk, Sheila took another sip from the cold cup of coffee. Bjorn was dead. She remembered their lunch at the café when he has proposed to her. After getting over the shock, she had started to refuse him, thinking of Arden. He had told her that he would be willing to give up everything to stay with her. He would even give up his quest. Hearing that she realized how much he must love her, and how much he was willing to give up for her. It also made her realize how selfish she had been

towards him, trying to keep him for herself. If you love something, you must let it go. Saying yes to Bjorn, she had let Arden go.

But now Bjorn was dead, and Arden couldn't have cared less. He looked at his body like it was a slab of meat. Even when she shouted at him, he didn't show any emotions, just confusion.

Shivering, she was startled as a hand touched her shoulder. Looking up, she saw it was Detective Jones. She had wanted to tell the other detectives about Arden's actions, but Jones had talked her out of it. If she did so, Zig Zag would be in trouble as well. Once again someone else had to pay for Arden's actions.

Looking to where he was pointing, she saw Zig Zag and James through the window, standing in the waiting area. Standing she followed the detective out to the lobby. Walking quickly up to Zig Zag and James, she embraced them both, craving the security of their arms.

After making sure that she was OK, James and Zig Zag escorted her outside. As they approached the cars, Sheila spotted Arden.

Stopping in her tracks, she asked, "What's he doing here?" James and Zig Zag exchanged glances. "He's here to drive you home," James explained. Becoming agitated, she backed up from the pair. "No! I'm not going anywhere with him. There is something very wrong with him. Don't you remember how he acted this morning?" she demanded insistently of Zig Zag. Stepping forward, Zig Zag took her hands, "Yes, I can. I was there, and I can tell you that he couldn't help it. But that person is gone now, buried the same way it was before when you knew him." Zig Zag explained, pleading. "Give him a chance, Sheila. He blames himself for not being able to save Bjorn."

Looking at James, Sheila saw him turn away. Obviously he wasn't going to defend Arden. Looking over at Arden, she saw that he was standing by the car, paws interlaced, wearing an odd pair of sun glasses he had picked up the day someone had tried to kill him at James's. Her thoughts interrupted from a squeeze of her hands by Zig Zag. "Go to him. Talk to him. Please, don't let it end this way." Zig Zag begged, releasing her hands.

Turning, Sheila walked over to Arden. As she approached, he stood away from the car, hands at his side, fidgety as if he didn't know what to do with them. Standing close to him, she looked up into the reflection of her face in the lenses. Angry that he wouldn't look directly at her, she smacked him as hard as she could.

His head spun to the side, the sunglasses flying from his face. Eyes closed, he brought his face around towards her. Still keeping them closed, he waited. Angrily she demanded, "Look at me, damn it! Look me in the eye!" Squeezing his eyes shut, he looked as if he were going to speak, but changed his mind. Opening his eyes, he looked directly at her, his stare unwavering.

Putting her paws to her face, Sheila stumbled backwards from the shock, into the hands of James who had expected her reaction. "My god, what happened to your eyes?" she exclaimed. Turning, Arden bent and picked up the sunglasses and replaced them on his

head. Turning back to her, he explained. "I made a deal with the Dragon to try to save you and Zig Zag."

Sheila's anger flared. She stepped forward and demanded, "And what about Bjorn? Did you ever stop to think about him?" Swallowing, Arden fought back tears. "I'm sorry. He was dead already. When he died, I realized that there was no way I would be able to save you or Zig Zag, not without the Dragon's help." He explained. Turning his head away, he continued, "He forced me to swear to complete the quest before he would give me help. I just couldn't do that to you. Not until I realized that you would die because of my... arrogance."

Stunned, Sheila could only stare at him. She didn't know what to make of this. "Had he honestly wanted to save Bjorn?" she asked herself. Confused, Sheila gave herself a hug as she suddenly shivered.

Leading her to the car, James opened the door and helped her into the passenger seat. Regaining his composure, Arden gave Zig Zag a hug, before climbing into the drivers seat. James and Zig Zag stood, watching the car, as Arden drove away.

Walking back to their car, Zig Zag hoped that Sheila would be ok. Giving James a hug, she wiped her eyes and thanked the powers that be that she still had him.

# Chapter 44

Live and let die.

Hello folks, and welcome to your noon Independent News report. I'm your host, Logan Furbody. Well we have lots of interesting things to report on today, but first, a tragedy.

He became very solemn.

As we reported yesterday, unknown assailants kidnapped the lovely Sheila Vixen and Bjorn Otterson. This morning we were informed by the police that apparently some kind of firefight had broken out between the kidnapers and some other unknown agency, resulting in the death of Bjorn Otterson.

Shifting the camera angle, they placed a picture of Bjorn in the corner.

Bjorn was currently working on a project at ZZ Studios at the time of his abduction. Recent news showed that he was also scheduled to begin work on a big budget movie in Europe to be released late next year.

Although police have several leads, they are unable to comment on any particular parties that may have been responsible. However we did overhear an offhanded remark indicating that incriminating documentation had been found providing them the first solid evidence they had in the case so far.

This is one reporter who would like to take a moment and extend his most sincere condolences to Sheila Vixen and all the gang at ZZ Studios.

Pausing for a few seconds, he set the paper aside. As the picture of Bjorn fade, the camera panned back to Logan. Taking a deep breath, he started in on the next story and stopped.

We'll be right back after this message.

The camera continued to cover Logan for a few seconds as he tried to maintain control. Cutting to a commercial, it talked about a special that would be on tonight, chronicling Bjorn's life and excerpts of his interviews with Logan.

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Sheila woke up, alone, in her bed. Looking at her clock, she saw that it was well after noon. Climbing from her bed, she went to the bathroom. After relieving herself, she looked in the mirror. She looked as horrible as she felt. Picking up a brush, she began to groom the fur on the top of her head and then stopped. Staring at the mirror again for a moment, she tossed the brush carelessly onto the counter and left the room.

Standing in the doorway to the bedroom, she realized that it didn't look right. Zig Zag and James had arranged to replace and repair the damage to her bedroom. The carpet was new and fresh, the walls were painted in a close match to her old color, and the bed had also been replaced, new sheets and a cover on it. This wasn't her bedroom anymore. It was a cheap copy.

Walking out into the living room, she saw Arden sprawled out on the couch. The large pistol he had brought home on the table, next to the Japanese swords he had gotten. Surveying the room, she saw his cell phone on the charger, plugged into the wall by the end of the couch. Next to it was her phone, hand set off the hook to make sure nobody

called. On the ottoman she saw the overnight bag she had packed so long ago. Inside it his clothes and the weapons harness he had been wearing. On the floor by it, was the body armor he had worn.

Disgusted that he'd just toss his stuff on the floor, Sheila walked over and picked up the vest. It was surprisingly heavy. Looking at the back, she saw large pockets; each had a big rectangle of Kevlar plastic in it. Turning it around, she gasped. She remembered seeing the holes in the vest when he squatted down to check on her and Bjorn, but without light, she couldn't see that the holes went all the way through. As if to prove what she was seeing were real, Sheila poked a claw all the way through a hole and wiggled it.

Looking over at Arden, she could see the corresponding patches of missing fur where each hole in the vest would line up with his chest. Thinking back, she remembered after the car exploded. The helicopter had tried to strafe Zig Zag and herself, but the gunner had a hard time seeing them. As he had circled around, she had fallen. Zig Zag tried to help her up, but she was too scared to move. Watching the helicopter swing around, she was startled as something exploded in the air in front of it, causing it to veer off. Looking up the hill, she saw Bjorn's body laying on the ground, then Arden running up the hill. Reaching the top, he stood next to the burning car, illuminated by its fire.

She couldn't believe it when he pulled out a pistol and began firing at the approaching helicopter. All around him, tracers from the machinegun fire rained down like lightning on the vehicle, yet some how missing him. Now, looking at the scars, she realized that they didn't miss him. But how did he heal so fast? Machinegun bullets should have done a lot more damage.

The growl of her stomach interrupted her thoughts. She hadn't eaten since the Café yesterday. Dropping the armor on top of his bag, she walked over and hung up the phone. Proceeding into the kitchen, she opened the refrigerator and looked for something good to eat. Not feeling like making anything, she took out a square of cheddar cheese and a soda, a knife, some crackers and a plate. Piling everything on the plate, she walked around to the small table and sat down. Slicing some cheese, she began to eat, thinking about how Bjorn liked bleu cheese with crackers.

The ringing of the phone interrupted her thoughts. Jerking awake, Arden reached for the pistol, sitting up quickly. Before he could do anything with it, the phone rang again. Shaking his head, he put the pistol back on the table, and then answered the phone.

"Hello." He said, groggily. "What?... Yah, this is her place... No, she can't come to the phone. Who is this?... What?... What the hell kind of a question is that?... Are you stupid or something? Her fiancé was just killed, how the hell do you think she feels!" he yelled into the phone and slammed it back onto its cradle.

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Rubbing my hands over my face, I looked back at the phone. How the hell had it gotten back on the hook? Picking up the handset again, I unplugged it and tossed it over onto my overnight bag. Looking up as it landed, I saw Sheila sitting at the table.

## Chapter 44

Groggily I gave her a weak smile, "Good morning." Rubbing my eyes again, I saw the clock on the wall said it was almost one o'clock. Looking back, I smiled, "Correction. Good afternoon." I said with false cheeriness.

Looking at me for a second, she shifted her gaze to the cracker she had in her hand. Popping it into her mouth, she began chewing, ignoring my presence.

Getting up, I walked towards the bedroom. Looking back, I saw her watching me. "If you don't mind, I'm just going to use the facilities." I said sheepishly, pointing towards the bathroom. She neither nodded nor shook her head. Assuming that she wasn't going to maul me for taking a leak, I went into the bathroom. Finishing up, I washed and headed back out into the living room.

Walking over to the refrigerator, I took out a soda. Returning to the table, I sat down across from her. The last time I had been here was the night we had shared an Italian dinner. Popping the top, I took a sip as she continued eating cheese and crackers. The entire time, she just stared at me. Something in the back of my mind said it was time to shake things up a little.

Finishing the soda, I stood up and walked over to the coffee table and picked up the Desert Eagle that Tigger had given me. Returning to the dinette table, I ensured that there was a round in the chamber. As I sat down, I saw Sheila sitting up straight, eyes wide.

Placing the pistol on the table, I shoved it butt first over to her side. Staring at the pistol like it would jump up and bite her, she finally looked up at me, confusion etched on her face. "What's that for?" she asked. Nodding to it, I instructed her, "Pick it up." Glancing between the pistol and myself, she shook her head, "No, I won't." "Pick it up!" I barked, ordering her. Glaring at her, I watched as she picked up the weapon, surprised at its weight. "Now point it at me," I again ordered harshly. Shaking, she used both hands and pointed it at me, the barrel wavering.

Leaning forward so there would be no chance of her missing. "Now pull the trigger," I said quietly. Shaking, she began to breathe hard, her face flushing as the adrenaline hit her system. "Pull the damned trigger," I said, glaring. Her hands began to shake harder and then she dropped the pistol. Burying her hands in her face, she cried, "Why are you doing this to me?"

Taking the gun, I verified the safety was still on. "I'm sorry Bjorn's dead. There's nothing I can do about that. But for God's sake either talk to me, or kill me and get it over with. Just... stop giving me the cold shoulder," I said angrily.

Standing, I left the pistol on the table and walked over to the couch. Sitting, I tried to calm down. That was stupid. What the hell had I been thinking?

Looking at the swords, I picked up the Katana. Unsheathing it, I examined the blade. Giving a curse, I saw that it had dried blood still on it. Returning it to its scabbard, I fetched a bowl of water and a dishcloth from the kitchen. Setting them on the table, I again withdrew the sword. Wetting the cloth, I began cleaning the blade.



I felt Sheila sit down next to me. Looking at the sword, she asked, "What are you doing?" Continuing to work the dried blood out of the surface, I answered her. "I used this to kill your attackers last night," I explained quietly. "You really care about that sword, don't you?" she asked. Smiling, I nodded. She was at least trying to talk to me. "These swords are the symbol of the Samurai. Nowadays, they're just a collector's item. Most of the ones you'll see are machine made. Stamped from steel, they're just cheap junk," I complained.

Finished cleaning, I put the rag in the bowl. Holding the sword in front of her so she could look at the blade, I continued, "This is the pinnacle of the warrior spirit. Graceful and beautiful, it represents life and death, honor and fealty to one's master, atonement and redemption in seppuku. This sword is easily over two hundred years old. It was a family heirloom. By killing the bear that abducted you and Bjorn, I avenged the honor of its previous owner." I finished. Placing the blade back in its scabbard. I set it down next to the other two.

Picking up the Tanto, she asked, "What's this one?" "That's the Tanto," I stated. Smiling, she looked up at me, "As in the Lone Ranger's side kick?" Nodding, I agreed. "Yes, kind of. It's the equivalent of a dagger. The next one up is the Wakazashi and the big one is a Katana." I explained pointing to each one.

Replacing the Tanto in its sheath, she put it back down on the table. Sitting there, I watched her, as she stared at nothing in particular. After a few minutes, she looked up at me, tears in her eyes. "I'm sorry. I realize it wasn't your fault." She said quietly. Shaking my head, I disagreed. "No. Ultimately it's my fault. If I had left when I first found out that there was a contract on me, or gotten an apartment away from everyone, or one of a dozen other decisions I made... maybe Bjorn would still be alive. I keep thinking there must have been something I could have done different." I said quietly.

Scooting close to me, she leaned against me, cradling her head against my shoulder. Reaching around, I put my arm around her and gave her a gentle squeeze. "What do you think will happen to Khansman now?" she asked. Shaking my head, I thought about it. "Tigger said she had some incriminating documents. If that doesn't work though..." I let my answer trail off. "If that doesn't work, then what?" she asked. Kissing her on the top of her head, I said quietly, "Then I'll hunt him down and kill him."

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Later that evening, I was sitting on the couch watching TV as Sheila slept. She was still worn out by her ordeal. Surfing the channels I came across an image of Bjorn. Turning up the volume I listened in.

For the next fifty minutes, I saw a special put on by the local independent UHF channel about his life. The first twenty minutes covered his hometown, how he got into blue movies, and his eventual rise to fame. The rest of the program consisted of outtakes from his various interviews between Bjorn and Logan Furbody interspersed with history of what happened between each interview.

After the end of the program, they ran the credits. In the background they showed clips of bloopers he had made during various films and interviews, always laughing about it.

As the end of the credits rolled by, the frame froze on his smiling face, arm around Logan, they laughed at the camera. At the bottom was a graphic stating "Bjorn Otterson: 1965-2000"

Turning off the TV, I got up and went into the kitchen. Taking a paper towel, I blew my nose. Leaning against the counter, I thought about what I had seen. Obviously Logan had put a lot of time and effort into the program. Unlike anything else I had seen by him, this was pure, clean journalism. No, it was his monument to Bjorn.

I had once considered letting the guy have an interview. He appeared to be a decent bloke on TV, although irreverent. The interview clips he had showed were both serious and humorous, but never any of the loaded questions that you could expect from certain types of media hounds.

I decided that until I was given evidence to the contrary, I liked the guy.

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In the morning, I awoke to the sound of my cell phone ringing. Reaching up, I answered, "Hello?" "Arden?" It was Zig Zag. "You were expecting someone else to answer?" I quipped back. I heard her chuckle, "Around you? You never know." Getting more serious, she continued, "We're closing ZZ studios through Wednesday. I just wanted to let you know that we're planning a private memorial service for tomorrow afternoon."

Nodding to myself, it made sense. Obviously he wasn't going to be buried here. "Do you have all the details yet?" I asked. "No, not yet. James is trying to arrange for the location. I know you've got nothing but casual clothes. If Sheila feels up to it, I want you two to see about picking up something a little more formal," She explained. "Sure Zig Zag. No problem. I'll check with Sheila when she gets up," I informed her. Chuckling I heard her say, "No problem. Oh and Arden? Don't call me Zig Zag."

Hanging up the phone, I put it over by the charger. Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I saw Sheila standing in the door. "Who was that?" she asked. Yawning, I replied, "It was Zig Zag. She called to let us know that she's closed the studio until Wednesday." Nodding, she started to turn. "Also," I continued, "she wanted me to let you know that they're planning a private memorial service for Bjorn tomorrow." Nodding, she thought for a second. "I guess that means we need to get you some better clothes," She said. I agreed, "Yah, if you're feeling up to it that is. Otherwise Zigs will give me a hand." Laughing, she leaned on the door, "No way. I'm not letting her dress you up. We'll find you something tasteful without looking like a walking billboard for over priced clothing," She said. Turning somber, she continued, "Besides. It will give me something to do with myself. I'm tired of just sitting around here."

As she walked back to the bedroom, I heard her say, "I'm going to take a shower." And go into the bathroom. Waiting patiently, my bladder complained at having to wait. After a few minutes, I heard the shower start. Leaning back I thought about all the soda I had drunk last night. Deciding to risk it, I headed for the bathroom. Sheila was in the shower lathering up. Trying not to pay attention to the silhouette, I relieved myself. Flushing, I was rewarded with a shriek from within the shower.

## Chapter 44

Opening the shower door, Sheila barked at me, "Hey! What do you think you're doing?" Holding my hands up for defense, I backed up a step, "Sorry. I had to go." Rolling her eyes to the heavens, she directed me, "Next time, give a girl a little warning, will you?" she asked. Still holding my hands up, I waved them in surrender. "OK. No problem. It won't happen again." Slinging water at me, Sheila drove me off.

# Chapter 45

Would the guilty party please stand up?

Using the rental car, Sheila drove us to the mall. It occurred to me that if I was going to hang around, I'd need to get a license, but then I remembered I wasn't planning on staying that long. We had already stopped at a couple of men's clothiers and had one working on a nice contemporary suit. Now Sheila wanted to go power shopping. I think it's her version of getting drunk.

Climbing out of the car, I felt like there was a huge neon sign pointing at me. Walking with Sheila towards the entrance I gave a sheepish smile. "So tell me again why we couldn't dye my fur?" I asked weakly. Chucking, she gave me an elbow to the ribs. "Because I like my big, fluffy white dress-up bear," she replied cheerfully. Fingering my collar, I gave a mock gasp for breath. She only laughed.

Holding the door open for Sheila, we entered the mall. I was immediately hit with the mixture of scents and sounds. Following Sheila in, we came to the central corridor. Grinning with a feral grin, I saw Sheila rubbing her hands together. "All right now, let's shop!" she declared.

As we started walking towards some shops, I felt the crowd pressing in on me. I'd never seen so many species in one place. Mind you I've been in crowds before as a human, but this was different. The further in we went, the more I felt like they were pressing in on me. After about thirty feet, I gave a curse, turned and virtually ran out of the mall.

Standing outside, I leaned against the wall, panting. Still overwhelmed by the sounds and smells. Ever since I made the deal with the Dragon, I've been able to smell and hear stuff I'd never notice before. Now... It was like getting mugged.

After a few seconds, Sheila came out. Walking over to me, I could see the concern on her face. "Are you going to be OK?" she asked. Nodding, I tried to catch my breath. "I don't know what happened in there. I was just overwhelmed. You've got to understand. Since I made the deal with the dragon, my senses have gone hyper. I was just overwhelmed by the sounds and smells," I explained, straightening up.

Taking my arm, she pulled me towards the parking lot. "Don't worry about it. We'll go somewhere else," she conceded. Stopping her, I shook my head, "I just wasn't prepared for it. Lets try it again, this time we take it slow though, ok?" I asked, pulling for the door. Still giving me a worried look, we went back in.

Bracing myself, I walked in behind Sheila. Putting my arm around her shoulder, we slowly meandered by the stores, staying close to the wall. As I got used to moving around with the input overload, the panic attack began to fade. Coming to a record store, I pulled Sheila in. Perusing around, I saw various versions of the artists and albums that I knew of in my world. Getting to the comedy section, I found out that 'Running with Scissors' had been done by Weird Al Hamstervich.

Seeing what I was holding, Sheila giggled. "That guy's a riot." She said with a laugh. I was tempted to get her to buy it, just to see if it sounded the same, but changed my mind. Chuckling we wandered back out to the mall.

After stops in half a dozen shops, I was now carrying three bags for Sheila when we got to The Ultimate Leather Experiences. Being pulled in, I looked at the outfits and planted my feet firm. "No. I don't think so. I was willing to go along with the collar, but you aren't turning me into a snowball in leather!" I declared. Laughing, she dug in her claws and pulled me into the store. "Don't worry. I'm shopping for myself, not you this time." She promised, "Although you never know what we may find."

Finding a Harley Davidson motorcycle jacket, Sheila grabbed it off the rack and tried it on. Modeling it for me she asked, "So what do you think?" Giving a small golf clap, I laughed, "It's you. I never took you for a biker babe!" Laughing with me, she took the jacket off. "I'm not," she replied, "Bjorn's the biker. He just loves riding them..." I saw her ears wilt. Wrapping my arms around her, I held her. "We used to borrow Leon's Gold Wing for the weekend. We would ride for hours, in just about any direction. We had no planned destination. We just wanted to go on an adventure," she said, trying not to cry. Taking the hangar from the rack, she used it to hang the coat up. Looking up at me, she said, "Let's go."

Walking with her, I spoke quietly, "You know, running from the memories of Bjorn won't make it easier." Looking up at me, I could see she didn't understand. "Memories are all you have of him now. You need to cherish the memories. Revel in the good times and the bad. If you run from them, if you hide from them, then you cheapen their memory and the love you held for them." I explained. "Right now, the memories are painful because of the loss. It's also the time when you need to remember them the most. That's why people have memorial ceremonies. It's a way of sharing your memories with others so that the person you love lives on."

Reaching the doors to the parking lot, we walked out. The trip to the car was in silence. Taking the keys from her, I held the passenger door for her. After getting in, we drove around town for a little bit. Finding a park, I pulled in. It was too nice a day to be stuck driving around in a car. Stopping, we got out and started to walk.

Over the next couple of hours, I listened to her talk about Bjorn. We walked and laughed about her memories. Occasionally we compared notes with my old life. Sitting on a bench, we were trying to enjoy what was left of the day when I spotted them: Reporters.

The car was on the other side of the park. There was no way we'd be able to avoid the confrontation. "I don't want to talk to them," Sheila pleaded. Giving her a squeeze, I crossed my leg I tried to look casual, "Don't let them upset you. I'll do the talking."

The cameraman stopped about five feet away from us. Approaching, the reporter, a fox, had a microphone in hand. "Miss Vixen, any comment on you're recent experiences." The fox asked. Deflecting her attention, I asked her, "Say, you're that Lupus girl, aren't you?" Smiling at the recognition, she nodded, "Yes I am, Mr. Nanewk."

Standing, I gave a pleasant smile and moved by the reporter, cutting off the camera's view of Sheila, "It's Nah-Nuck, emphasis on the second syllable." I explained. Prompting her a few times I got her to say it right. "Now, before we answer your question, how

about answering one from me?" I asked. Confused, she nodded. Putting my arm around her shoulder, I pulled her next to me like one would a small child, when explaining something. "If you had been proposed to, kidnapped, and then watched your fiancé murdered before your very eyes, how would you feel?" I asked. Looking very uncomfortable, she replied, "I guess I would feel pretty terrible."

Smiling, I gave her a little squeeze. "There you go!" I praised her. "See. That was pretty simple. You have your answer, and you didn't have to bother Sheila either. Now tell you what. Why don't the two of you just wonder off somewhere and make a list of questions you can't figure out for yourself and then we'll see what happens," I said cheerfully, smiling at the camera. Stuttering she objected, "But... the people have a right to know." Interrupting her, I agreed, "You're right, they do. The trick is to tell them things they don't already know. Now run along and work on that list."

Letting go of her, I smiled at the camera. Seeing her about to object again, I reached down and wrapped my hand over the microphone. Leaning close to her ear I whispered, "Unless you want to have the same pleasure I did of being interviewed in the hospital, I'd suggest you take that camera and leave." Standing back, I reached out, lifted her chin so her mouth was closed and then gave the camera a big smile.

Turning away, I reached out to help Sheila up. Putting my arm around her shoulder, we strolled casually back to the car, sans reporters.

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After picking up the suit, we stopped off at an Outback for dinner. Everyone there had been cool about us. Only comments they had made was to say they were sorry to hear about Bjorn. Sipping on our drinks we waited for the meal to show.

"What did you say to that reporter? The look on her face was priceless." Sheila asked. Chuckling, I leaned over and talked to her in a conspiratorial voice, "I informed her that if she didn't take that camera and get lost, I'd make sure she had the pleasure of getting interviewed in the hospital, just like I did." Putting her hand over her muzzle, she fought a laugh, "You can't do that. They'd arrest you." Giving a shrug, I smiled back. "I don't think so. I covered the mike, so they didn't record it, and I spoke on the ear away from the camera. I think I'm pretty safe. Besides, I owe her." I explained.

Giving me a curious look, Sheila asked, "Why do you owe her?" Laughing, I couldn't believe she didn't remember. "That's the same fox that ambushed me in the hospital, remember?" I reminded her. Thinking, her eyes got kind of wide, "Oh yah. I remember that interview. It's what made me decide to go down and see you." That took me back. Maybe I didn't owe her that much.

Delivering the meal, the waitress refilled our drinks. I had ordered prime-rib, rare. Normally I preferred it to be medium well done, but today I was in the mood for something almost raw.

Licking my chops, I started cutting on the meat. "Would you not do that?" I heard Sheila ask. Looking up in confusion, I tilted my head. "What? I've seen people licking their

muzzle all the time." I asked. Leaning closer, she whispered, "Sure, but most of them don't have a forked tongue."

Startled, I sat up in the chair. Reaching up with my paw, I inconspicuously felt my tongue. Brow furrowed as I tried to figure out what the hell was going on. This morning when I looked in the mirror, it was normal.

Catching the concerned look on Sheila's face, I gave her a sheepish smile and shrugged it off. Digging into the meat, I tried not to worry about it for now.

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Checking my look in the mirror, I straightened the tie. It had been a long time since I had worn one. Brushing the fur back on my head, I nodded satisfied. The black suit enhanced the color of my fur, making it stand out all the more. Making sure I had the sunglasses in the pocket, I walked into Sheila's room.

She was still sitting in front of the dressing table. Walking over I put my paws on her shoulders. Looking up at me in the mirror, she patted my paw. I could see she had been crying again. Reaching past her, I took the brush from the table. Running it through her fur, I spent the next half hour helping her to prepare for the memorial service.

As she stood up, I handed her the jacket to her suit. She had decided on a conservative, black business suit almost identical to mine. Putting the jacket on, she took out the pair of sunglasses she had bought to cover her blood shot eyes. Putting them on she stood in front of the mirrored closets. "How do I look?" she asked. Standing next to her, I smiled. Putting my sunglasses on, I took an "at ease" stance next to her. "I'm agent A. This is agent S. Together we're the MIB." I said fighting to keep a straight face.

Laughing, she turned and punched me in the ribs. Looking up, she smiled. Reaching out she gave me a hug. "Thank you." She said quietly. Giving her a squeeze, I didn't know what to say. Releasing me, she backed up and sniffed. Giving another smile, she led the way to the car.

Arriving at the restaurant, we were greeted by a media circus. It had been decided that since Bjorn wasn't a very religious person, we'd hold the memorial at his favorite eating establishment. Driving through the crowd, I stopped at the end of the stairs. There was some security keeping the crowd back, but it wasn't enough. Climbing out, I walked around to Sheila. Helping her out, I watched the valet drive away with the car.

Leading her up to the doors, we tried to ignore the flashing lights and cameras as they tried to get a good shot. Reaching the doors, I escorted her inside. Just past the door, there were two people guarding the interior door and a waiter. Recognizing us for who we were, they passed us through.

Inside I saw that many of the tables had been moved out of the way, and a large circular grouping of chairs had been set up in the middle. Past the chairs, I saw a display of pictures from various movies and peoples personal pictures showing Bjorn. Off to one side was a large mixed buffet next to the bar.

Escorting Sheila into the room, we went over to the crowd. Many of the people there were from ZZ Studios, although I discovered a large number I'd never seen before. Some were past employees while others were just friends, there to support grieving friends. As Sheila introduced me around, I was surprised to find more than one major celebrity had flown in on word of his death.

The most common questions I heard people ask of Sheila were checking to see if she was ok, see if she needed anything, or if she was planning to fly to his funeral next week. Her answers were yes, no and I hope so, in that order.

Needing a break from the crowd, I headed back to the front door. I wanted to check with security and verify that they had gotten more manpower. As I approached the entry foyer, I was surprised to hear arguing. Opening the inner door, I saw the two security guards arguing with someone. Approaching I saw it was Logan.

"Damn it, the guy was a friend of mine." He argued with the waiter. "I'm sorry sir, but you are not on the list." The waiter responded. Clearing my throat, I got their attention. "If you don't mind, I believe Logan may have been accidentally left off the list. Please let him pass." Giving me an inquiring look, the waiter asked, "And just who invited him?" Stepping forward, I gave a low growl, "I invited him." The waiter's eyes got large as he backed away from me. "I'm sorry sir. I had no idea you were associated with this... person." He said in way of an apology.

Gesturing to Logan, I lead him inside. "I'd like to thank you for what you did back there." Logan said, taking my hand. Nodding, I gave him a firm handshake, "After seeing your special about Bjorn, I couldn't leave you hanging out on the cold. Just remember that this is private. Nothing in here is for the public." Nodding, he agreed, "I wouldn't have it any other way. Just make sure Frosty and Flake don't get in here though."

Laughing at that, we headed over to the bar. Ordering drinks, we leaned back and watched the crowd. "I take it that you're the Arden that we've been talking about so much?" He asked. Nodding, I acknowledged my guilt. "I have that unpleasant honor." I replied, sipping my drink. "Say, why don't you do an interview for me? Clear up some of the stupid tripe they're rattling off about what's happened." He offered. Shaking my head, "I'm afraid I can't afford to be on camera any more." I answered. "What do you mean?" he asked, "You're a natural. Besides it wouldn't be live. We could edit out any screw-ups. I'll even give you final word on editing." Taking a long draw on the brew, I thought about it. "I really would love to do that, but I'm afraid there are some circumstances that are out of my control, preventing me from doing so." I told him.

Just as he was about to press his point, Zig Zag interrupted us. "Just what the hell are you doing here? Why can't you people leave us the hell alone!" she demanded. Logan got a sheepish look on his face, trying to find a way to defend himself. "I invited him Zig." I said, saving him the effort. Giving me a disbelieving look, she demanded, "What on God's green earth possessed you to do something like that?" Looking her in the eye, I stated as matter of factly as possible, "He was Bjorn's friend."



That took her off guard. "Did you watch the memorial special he did on Bjorn, Sunday evening?" I asked. Confused by what I said, she shook her head. "I've seen lots of documentaries on people's lives. The one he did on Bjorn was one of the best. It had a lot of heart in it. He could have screwed with him, or twisted the facts a little, but he didn't. It showed a lot of dedication and respect. For that reason, I'm willing to give him a chance," I explained.

Hearing this, Zig Zag studied Logan's face. The poor guy looked like a dog caught making a mess on the rug. Giving a little nod, she apologized, "I'm sorry. I'm so used to the media looking for any opportunity to screw us over. If Arden vouches for you, I guess I can live with it." Still looking rather dejected, Logan nodded, "I know you have no reason to like me Zig Zag, but please believe me when I say the only reason I'm here is because I count my self lucky enough to have had Bjorn for a friend." Giving me a sideways glance, she nodded and left us.

Relaxing against the bar, Logan slammed back his drink. "That's two I owe you now." He said. Draining the rest of my beer, I nodded. "If you really were Bjorn's friend, then I could do no less." Standing, I leaned close, "Just understand something. If you're here for any other reason, or if I see you using this on your show..." I let the threat trail off. Tossing a ten spot on the bar, I paid for our drinks and went looking for Sheila.

After about an hour, Zig Zag came and got Sheila and myself. Leading us to the circle, she sat us next to the chair by Bjorn's picture. Ringing the wine glass she held with a spoon, she got everyone's attention. "Would everyone please take a seat?" she asked, waving to the circle of chairs. After everyone was seated, Zig Zag spoke again, "As was suggested by a friend today," she said, nodding to Lenore, "I'd like to take this time to offer everyone a chance to say something about Bjorn. It can be some thing as simple as, say, he was a great kisser..." She got a laugh with that, "To some humorous anecdote about something he did. Nobody need feel forced to participate, however we are here to honor his memory and the best way to do that is to share."

Smiling, Zig Zag told of her beginnings in the blue film market, and how she came to own her own studio. It turns out that one of her first films had been with Bjorn and he remembered her. Taking a fair chunk of his savings, he had invested it in ZZ Studios. It was an investment that had been paid off many times over. It also was one of the reasons he was still willing to do work at ZZ Studios.

As she sat down, the ball was passed to James. Having not known the little guy, he simply passed on to the next. For the next couple of hours we laughed at some of the outrageous things that Bjorn had done. Smiled at the way people remembered him helping them as they were struggling in the business and the occasional story of him struggling with some problem. Finally the ball came back to me.

Standing, I hung my head a little. "I'm embarrassed to say this, but... I didn't like Bjorn." There were disbelieving looks around the ring. "I doubt any of you are aware of the fact that Sheila and I were something of a item recently." That got a polite chuckle from the many of the folk from ZZ's. "Being a male not performing in the blue film industry, I was willing, even happy to allow Sheila to continue her work just as long as it was me she

came home to." This got nods from several people. "Unfortunately, when Bjorn came to town, he didn't realize how serious we were, and subsequently seduced her outside the studio, at his apartment." Looking at Sheila, I could see the betrayal in her eyes. "This caused both Sheila and myself no small amount of grief and caused me to reevaluate my relationship with Sheila. You see, I had become aware of the fact that she and Bjorn were close. Not just casual lovers, but very good friends."

As I paused for a sip of my drink, I saw the confused look on people's faces as they tried to figure out where this was going. "Many of you know that I have been filling the role of masseuse at the studio. The first day Bjorn was there, I took advantage of my position to, literally, pin him down and have a talk." Again I looked at Sheila. She was staring at me with those wide, beautiful green eyes. This was news to her. "During my talk with him, I pointed out that I understood that he and Sheila had a long history and for that reason I wasn't going to take it personally." I got a bit of a sheepish look on my face, "Actually, I told him I wouldn't break his scrawny neck." That got another chuckle. "However, I also emphasized that if he was going to come in and make a move on Sheila like that, he had better be sure of his motives. If he was going to treat her like some local bed warmer, I was going to take it personal." Again I took a sip. "The thing is," I said trying to get to the point, "before I let him go, I warned him that he needed to take a long, hard look at his feelings for Sheila and decide if he was serious about her or not."

Pausing to maintain control, I took a deep breath. "So you could say that in a way, it was my fault that he took her out that day to propose to her." Struggling to be able to speak, I finally blurted out, "I didn't have a chance to know Bjorn well. But listening to everyone talk, I think I would have liked him, given time." Sitting down, I buried my face in my paws.

As I sat there, trying to regain control, I felt Sheila's paw on my shoulder, giving me a gentle squeeze. "I had thought to talk about all the fun times I had with Bjorn, but after that bomb..." she said, squeezing my shoulder. "When Bjorn proposed to me, it was the second most powerful shock of my life. The first being the impact of Zig's car door against me as it caved in, when we hit Arden." She said, getting a small chuckle from people in the know. "After I accepted..." she paused, trying not to cry, "After I accepted, I asked him why, after all this time? Why propose now?" Looking up, I saw her smiling down on me, "He told me that a very special friend had forced him to take a good look in the mirror, and that he would much rather spend the rest of his life with me than without." Smiling, the tears rolled down her cheeks, "At that time I had no clue who Bjorn was talking about, but I can say with certainty now that he considered Arden a friend." Bending over, she gave me a kiss on the head.

As Sheila sat down, a hand tapped me on the shoulder. A waiter was handing me a glass of champagne. Taking it, I saw three others going around the outside of the circle, passing them out. After everyone had a drink Zig Zag stood, waving for everyone to do the same. "We have all lost a friend," she said to the group, "but his memory will not be lost to us. So I hereby propose a toast: To Bjorn, wherever you are. You have touched our hearts and will be sorely missed," she stated, voice quavering. We each touched glasses with the person next to us and then drank to his memory.

After the toast, the circle broke up. I still didn't have my feelings under control so I headed for the bathroom. Going to the sink, I took off the sunglasses and began rinsing my face and head off with cold water. As I was doing this, I heard someone come in. Continuing to keep my face down, I made an extended point of washing my face. A hand patted me on the back. "You going to be ok there?" I heard Logan ask. "Yah." I replied, still in the sink.

Hearing him walk over and start using the urinal, I turned off the water and stood up. Shaking off my fur, I looked at myself in the mirror. Startled, I saw not my own reflection, but that of a large creature with grayish green skin. Its ears were more human, though pointed, with the tips high up, pressed against the side of the head. From its lower jaw I saw two large 'fangs' protruding from its upper lips, a good half inch in length. From its head I saw thick, black hair that was pulled back between the ears and cascaded below the shoulder level. Shocked, I stared at the image before me. It was like nothing I'd ever seen before. Worse yet, it had my eyes.

"Hey. You OK there?" The shock of Logan clapping me on the shoulder and speaking startled me. Looking at him by reflex, I saw his eyes get wide as he stumbled backwards. Giving a curse, I snatched up the sunglasses and put them on. Turning back to Logan, I saw him plastered against the wall, trying to press through it. As I stood there and casually watched him, I saw him relax and get control.

"Tell me those are contacts." He said. Shaking my head I frowned, "Do you seriously think I'd do that at a funeral?" Hesitantly, he came back over, "What happened to your eyes? When I saw you on TV at the hospital, your eyes were normal." Shrugging, I decided to recycle my excuse, "I'm a half breed. My lesser half is starting to show itself." Trying to look past the glasses, he asked, "Do they hurt?" Shaking my head, "No, not anymore. They used to." "No wonder you never take those things off any more." He said, coming to the realization.

As he thought about it, his expression changed. "The demon with the red eyes." He whispered to himself. "What are you talking about?" I asked. Surprised he blinked, "What?" Grabbing the front of his suit, I backed him up against the wall, "You said 'The demon with the red eyes.' What did you mean by that?" I demanded. Swallowing at my sudden aggression, "It was something I got from the cops. The one kidnapper that survived kept babbling about the demon with red eyes. Claimed that the thing shot down the helicopter with a pistol, then used a sword to kill the crew."

Letting go of him I gave a curse. I should have killed the guy after all. Logan connected the dots, "It was you. You're connected with the rescue attempt." He stated. Snatching the glasses off with my right paw, I grabbed his suit in my left and lifted him to eye level, "If you *ever* mention this to anyone, I will hunt you down and kill you." I could smell the fear coming from him. "No. I swear to God, I won't tell anyone." He declared.

Setting him back down, I continued to stare at him. "I won't. Your secret is safe with me. But I want something in exchange," he stated. I let out a bark of laughter. This guy had brass cojones to be bargaining with me. "Ok. What do you want?" I asked. Stepping close, he spoke in a conspiratorial whisper, "I know I promised not to use anything about

the funeral, but please, tell me what really happened. I swear I'll keep names out and make sure I leave out enough detail that it won't come back to you. My sources tell me that there already may be a cover up in the works, trying to bury the evidence."

Damn. If Khansman was successful in pulling off a cover up, or deflecting the direction of the investigation, he could get away with it. And if my hunch was right, I wouldn't be around this reality much longer to deal with him. "OK. Give me a number where I can reach you." I said. Taking his card, I put it in my pocket. As I was about to leave, he put a hand on my shoulder, stopping me. "Just answer one question." He said. Nodding, I waited. "Was there any way to save Bjorn?" he asked. I could see pain in his eyes. Shaking my head, "We had no idea they had a combat equipped helicopter. If we did, we could have dealt with it." Nodding, he accepted my answer.

Putting the sunglasses back on, I returned to the party, keeping a close eye on him. I didn't know if I had an ally or an enemy.

# Chapter 46

Something to remember you by.

Arriving at Sheila's, I pulled in to the driveway and parked the car. The memorial had continued on for hours after the toast. Someone had brought a copy of Logan's memorial special as well as a few of the blooper reels from Bjorn's career. All in all, I was glad to have been able to attend.

Locking the door behind me, I was ambushed by Sheila as I turned around. Grabbing my ears, she pulled me down to her level and laid one of her kisses on me. Straightening up as she released me, I found my back against the door. "What was that for?" I asked. Wrapping her arms around me, she looked up at me with a content smile. "Because I love you. Despite all that's happened, I still love you as much as ever," she said quietly. Jesus what can you say to that?

Returning the hug, I felt worse than before. Bjorn was dead. It was my fault and the woman I so desperately loved was now in my arms again. Didn't she understand that I had to leave her soon? How could this get any worse?

Releasing me, she walked into the condo and headed for her room while I waited in the living room. Sitting down, I tried to get control of myself. That kiss and the hug had aroused me and I didn't like it. It felt like I was moving in on Bjorn's ghost.

Taking the suit off, I used the hangar to keep it neat and laid it over the back of the couch. Pulling on some blue Gym shorts, I sat down and relaxed on the couch. This had been a very draining day for me, both emotionally and physically. Closing my eyes, I did some breathing exercises to try and get rid of the fatigue. After about ten minutes, I heard Sheila calling me, asking for my help.

Getting up, I waked into the bedroom to see the Sheila standing in the middle of the room, nude. Seeing the confusion on my face, she told me firmly, "Come here." Shaking my head, I looked away, closing my eyes. "I'm sorry Sheila, but I can't," I said, ashamed at my body's reaction. Padding over to me, she took my face and pulled it towards her. "Look at me," she said quietly, "Please, my love."

Looking down into those gorgeous green eyes. Her fur, normally bound in the back hung over her shoulders. The smell of her scent was intoxicating.

Duty and Honor, I had given her to Bjorn. It wasn't right to take her back so soon. My reflection in her eyes showed the conflict going on within me. Closing my eyes, I spoke, "I'm sorry Sheila, I can't do this." As she ran her hands through the fur on my chest, she spoke. "I loved Bjorn, and I'll miss him terribly, but I love you too. I know you've got to leave me soon too. Please, don't deny me this time we have left. I realized tonight that life is too precious for us to deny the love we hold," she said, pleading quietly, "I need you to love me. Take me in your arms, hold me and prove that you're still here for me. That you still love me."

Opening my eyes, I could see the tears brimming in her eyes as Sheila pleaded with me. Prove that I still loved her, how could I refuse. Bending, I wrapped my arms around her waist and gently lifted her. Our muzzles locked in a kiss matching our embrace; I carried

her over to the bed. The last of my resistance crumbled as I heard the memory of Bjorn's voice in my head, emphasizing that Sheila's happiness was what was most important to him.

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Looking at the clock, Sheila saw that it was almost one in the morning. Climbing quietly out of bed, she went into the bathroom. Relieving herself, she then stopped to examine her appearance in the mirror. She still felt the warm glow that came after making love. Pulling out the drawer by the sink, she once again looked at her box of birth control items.

Before calling Arden in, she had made the final decision not to use protection. Once again looking at the diaphragm and tube of contraceptive gel, she asked herself, "Am I doing the right thing? What right do I have, taking a child from him and not telling?"

Duty and Honor. Arden said those were the traits of the Dragon and he must walk that path. If that's so, then he would never be able to leave her if he knew what she intended.

Placing the box back inside the drawer, she noted the hormone suppressants that she normally used for birth control. Knowing Bjorn was coming, she had stopped using them. She had to do it every so often anyway, but by timing it with Bjorn's appearance, she intentionally threw herself into near state of heat. It was the secret to their intensity on and off the screen. Now it would be the secret to her keeping a piece of the one man remaining that she loved before he too must leave.

Smiling into the mirror, she gave herself a wink before turning out the light and returning to bed. It was time to wake up lover boy and remind him just what falling in love with a vixen was all about.

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As I was rudely awakened, again, I found Sheila sitting on my stomach, using the tips of her paws to tickle my side. Grabbing them, I quickly stopped her. "Good lord woman! Can't a man get any sleep around you?" I asked, a wide smile on my face. Leaning over, she began nibbling my neck, while rubbing her tail around in the general vicinity of my groin. "Not if I can help it," she explained between nips.

Letting my arms flop to the side, I let out an exaggerated sigh. "If I didn't know better, I'd swear you're in heat," I declared. Nibbling on my right ear, I heard her respond, "Who's to say I'm not?"

That got my attention. Pushing her shoulders away from me, I stared at her. "What do you mean you're in heat?" I asked, distressed. Not being able to nip me directly, she began raking her claws up and down my chest. I had the choice of holding her up or stopping her claws. I decided on stopping the claws.

Holding them firmly so she couldnt torture me with them, I raised my eyebrows, looking for an answer. Leaning forward, she rubbed the side of her muzzle against mine. "When Bjorn was scheduled to come, I stopped taking my hormone suppressants," she gave as an explanation. Making the connection, I used her hands to push her back up.

"What about getting pregnant? Aren't you worried?" I asked, concerned at the possibility. Laughing, she continued torturing me with her tail. "Silly boy. I've been dealing with this since well before you were a bear," she said with a leer. "You don't seriously believe the pill is the only contraceptive I have access to."

Sliding her body down towards my groin, she me a sly grin. Rolling my eyes up into my head, I gave her a kiss. "I'll be glad when you go back to work. You're gonna kill me you keep this pace up."

Even as I said it I knew it was a mistake. Sheila froze, her face just wilted. "Oh God Sheila. I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that," I said, begging her forgiveness. Shaking her head, she sat back and looked down on me and said, "It's not that. I'm leaving the studio."

You could have knocked me over with a feather, if I hadn't already been lying down that is. "Oh no love. Don't say that. Don't tell me you're giving up ZZ's." I begged. Shaking her head she looked away from my eyes. "I'm sorry, but my heart just isn't in it. There's too much pain there for me right now. Maybe some day I'll come back, but for now..." she said, letting her explanation trail off. Leaning forward, she gave me a kiss. "So you see. You're my farewell performance, at least for the time being," she said gently.

Pulling her close, I held on to her tight, trying not to cry. What had I done.... what had I done.

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Zig Zag arrived at the studio shortly before one in the afternoon. The studio was supposed to be closed today, but Sheila had called and asked her to do her a favor and let her in. She needed to get something from the studio. Sheila had also asked Zig Zag to make sure and bring her digital camera.

Curious about what was going on, Zig Zag let herself into the building. Locking the door behind her, she quickly proceeded around the corner to the alarm panel and disarmed the system. Walking back out into the lobby, she sat down on the couch and got comfortable.

Smiling, she remembered seeing Logan's noon report. Ever since meeting him at the memorial and seeing his tribute to Bjorn, she had lightened up her opinion of him. Sure the media was still full of idiots and jerks, out for nothing more than ratings, but once in a great while there was a jewel out there. Mind you, he was cracked and flawed, but he was a hell of a lot better than the other jerks. So far he had been the only one to break the fact that the DA was under suspicion for conspiracy to commit murder. Going public with reports from his "informants" that the police had found incriminating evidence showing that he was linked with the kidnappers who had killed Bjorn.

Of course, that didn't stop him from raking her and everyone else over the coals that was involved in the story. The only thing that kept her from tuning out was the fact that he gave *everyone* the same treatment. That was a lot better than she got elsewhere. Chuckling, she decided to let Arden live for inviting the guy to Bjorn's memorial.

Hearing a clink on the glass door, Zig Zag looked up to see Arden and Sheila standing there. Letting them in, she gave each a hug. "What's up Kiddo's?" she asked. Giving her a wink, Sheila said nothing. As Zig Zag glanced at Arden, she saw him shrug. Obviously Sheila wanted to be mysterious.

Leading the group to one of the still photo stages, Sheila whispered something to Arden. Her curiosity piqued, Zig Zag laughed. "Don't tell me the boy finally decided to do some camera work?" she asked. His head snapped around so fast, the sunglasses fell off. Glaring at both Sheila and Zig Zag as they laughed at his distress, he picked up the glasses. "Not the kind **you** wanna take." He growled.

Opening the bag he had brought, Zig Zag watched as Arden withdrew several pieces of colorful silk clothing. Changing into them, she could see that they were of oriental design, with those funny symbols they used for writing over there. Tying on a headband, he completed the basics. Withdrawing the three swords that Tigger had given him, he inserted them in between the overlapping silk belt he had wrapped around the outfit to hold it closed. Giving one last adjustment to their placement, he stood, arms at his hips, legs spread. "So, how do I look?" he asked.

Giving a laugh, Zig Zag brought up her camera and snapped a picture, "Like a samurai warrior, only I don't think they had sunglasses back then." Nodding, he removed the glasses and tossed them in the bag. "If anyone sees these pictures, tell them I pissed you off and you edited the eyes," he instructed her.

As Sheila came over and joined him, Zig Zag saw that she was dressed also in a Japanese outfit. Taking hold of her long head fur, Arden began working it into an elaborate bun on the top of her head. Using several long needles as hairpins, he locked the fur into an immobile mass on the top of Sheila's head. Standing side by side, Zig Zag got the definite impression that she was supposed to be playing the part of a Geisha girl. Snapping another picture she nodded, "Very nice. But did you have to drag me down here on my day off?"

Shrugging, Sheila looked a bit sheepish. "I'm sorry Zig Zag, but I realized that I didn't have any pictures of Arden other than the ones you took of us tickle fighting. I really appreciate you doing this for us without an audience," Sheila said. Nodding, Zig Zag could understand. For the next hour or so, she took pictures of Sheila and Arden, posing for posterity.

After the shoot, Sheila asked Zig Zag to sit with them. "Zig's, I hate to have to have to tell you this... but I'm going to be leaving the studio." Sheila announced. Stunned, Zig Zag shot Arden a questioning look. Raising his hands, he shook his head. He had nothing to do with it. Turning back to Sheila, she looked for an answer. She started to ask why, but changed her mind, realizing the reason.

"How long do you think you'll be away?" Zig Zag asked. "I don't know," Sheila answered quietly, "There are too many ghosts here for me. It's too painful right now." Giving a knowing nod, Zig Zag fought back some tears, "What will you do with yourself?" she asked. Shrugging, Sheila looked at Arden, "Arden's talked so much about



how beautiful Japan and Australia are. I was thinking I'd go 'walkabout' as he puts it. Just explore for the sake of doing it." Standing, Sheila gave Zig Zag a quick hug. "I'm going to clean out my locker now," she said, picking up her bag.

Crossing her arms, Zig Zag gave Arden a hard look. Raising his hands defensively again, he answered her charge, "Don't look at me. I tried to talk her out of it." Rubbing his eyes with a paw, he commented, "I've screwed up everything I've touched since I got here."

Shaking his head, Arden reached over for the bag he brought. Reaching in, he took out the equipment harness. In the holster was the Desert Eagle. "I lost the pistols that James loaned us. Please give this to him and ask if he'll accept it in way of payment," Arden asked. Taking the harness in one finger, Zig Zag held it like it was a dirty sock, avoiding unnecessary contact. "OK. I'll give it to him. You don't think you need it anymore?" she asked. Shaking his head, he stood up with the bag. "With the stuff that I gave Logan last night along with the evidence Tigger gave Jones, I think the DA's out of our fur for now." I said for an explanation.

Watching him walk out the room, Zig Zag again looked at the gun. "Man, I thought that revolver James had was a cannon." She said to herself. Standing up, she headed for her office. Time to lock this monster in the safe and go check up on Sheila.

Once she had stored the weapon, Zig Zag proceeded to the locker room. Walking in, she saw Arden sitting on the bench by Sheila's locker. She was handing him stuff to put in bag, occasionally explaining what it was. As she approached the pair, she heard Arden let out a loud bark of laughter.

Sitting on the opposite side of Sheila, she looked to see her holding a box. On the cover was a label "Betty Trucker's Road Kill Helper." Laughing hard, Arden told Sheila he had one almost exactly like it in his old life. Giving a little laugh, Sheila recounted the story about where Bjorn had bought it for her at a truck stop.

As Sheila turned it over, Zig Zag heard something rattling around in side. Holding very still Sheila put her head down and spoke softly, "Arden, I owe you an apology." Zig Zag saw a look of confusion on his face. "Whatever for love?" he asked, rubbing his paw on her back. Sniffing quietly, Sheila wiped her muzzle. "I've been very selfish of you. I've kept you here when you had important work to do."

Opening the top of the box, Sheila dumped the contents into her hand. Looking, Zig Zag could see it was the silver medallion that Arden had described. Hearing a gasp, she saw Arden's eyes get wide. Turning the amulet over in her hands, Sheila traced the outside of the face with a claw. "I've had this since the night that we hit you with the car." She explained.

Looking at Arden, Zig Zag saw him shoot her a hard look. Raising her hands in defense, it was Zig Zag's turn to plead innocence. "When you first saw me in the ditch," Sheila explained, "you reached up with your left hand and placed it in mine. I've kept it ever since." Letting out a small sob, she clenched the amulet tightly. "I didn't want to lose you. I'm sorry." As Sheila began crying again, Arden put his arms around her, holding her

tight. Sheila shook her head in denial. "If I had given you the amulet," she sobbed, "Bjorn would be alive now! God... I just.... I just ..."

Reaching out to put a comforting hand on Sheila, Zig Zag was surprised to get a strong electrical zap that numbed her hand. Sheila didn't appear to even notice it. Rubbing her palm, Zig Zag looked with concern at the two. "Oh Arden," Sheila said, "I just wish there was some way we could bring Bjorn back."

"DONE!" a voice, out of the air, spoke. Shocked, Zig Zag saw red light shooting from Sheila's hand. "NO!" Arden screamed and tried to grab the amulet from her.

There was a loud clap of thunder, throwing Zig Zag away from the pair and against the wall. Stunned, she watched as they were engulfed in a pillar of flame, the stench of sulfur and brimstone filled the air. As she watched in horror, she saw them writhing in pain, their features becoming indistinct as the flames swirled around them, all to the sound of a thousand horrible voices laughing.

Crawling towards the pair, Zig Zag was momentarily blinded by a flash of light, and the clap of inrushing air, as the pair disappeared from the room leaving nothing but the stench and the echo of laughter.

"Oh my God!" she thought, "Arden was telling the truth. It had all been true! And now they were gone. Oh God! They can never come back!" Shaking, Zig Zag collapsed to the floor, crying, mourning for two more friends she would never see again.