

Change of Seasons Book II

by

Nicolai

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-- *Chuck Percy – July 2008*

Contents

Chapter 20: A New Assignment	1
Chapter 21: Departure.....	20
Chapter 22: Trouble in Seattle	40
Chapter 23: Arrivals and Departures	65
Chapter 24: Good News.....	83

Chapter 20 A New Assignment

Kel looks at Karl in disbelief. “You got who to donate pistols?” she asks.

“Ruger. This is their Olympic model .22, and they have an Olympic centerfire going through their custom shop right now, ought to be here in a month or so,” Karl says with a muzzle-splitting grin, highly pleased that his surprise has worked.

“I love their guns, but I didn't know they made Olympic pistols. I can't believe this,” Kel says, shaking her head.

“Oh, they do. They also do rifles and shotguns, but you're not entering those events. Are you? Please say no.”

“Oh. No, not this time. I'm pretty good with a rifle and I can hold my own with a shotgun, but I'll save that for next time, I think.”

“Good. I can't train you for those events, anyway, and I do think that would be a bit much for any fur to take on. Besides, a lot of those events are simultaneous with the pistol, which makes it difficult to compete in everything.”

Kel looks at her coach and grins. “Why not? I thought you could do anything. Aren't you God?”

“Yes I am. At least as far as you're concerned, when it's about getting you trained. Outside of that, no, unfortunately. Then again, no sane fur would want that job,” he says with a wry look. “The hours are terrible and the pay is worse.”

“Now,” he continues, “I'm still working on the air pistol. That's probably going to take a little longer. I did have Ruger send right and left paw grip sets with this one, and they'll also have both on the centerfire. So you can train with both paws on the same gun. Takes only a few minutes to switch the grips, and once they're adjusted, they stay adjusted quite well. So there shouldn't be any problems with having to readjust the grips every time you switch. We'll figure out the details as we go along.”

“Let me have my pistol, please,” she asks.

When he hands it over, she sits down at the table and skims through the manual. She then proceeds to field strip the pistol. Fetching her cleaning kit from her car, she cleans the new pistol thoroughly, then reassembles it and returns it to its case.

“Can we head for the range now?” she asks.

“Not yet,” Karl tells her. “First, we need to adjust the grips, both sets. Then I want to see how steady you are, and Ruger sent along a training aid for that.” He takes out a pair of boxes, and gets the grips out of the larger one. After a lengthy session, they both declare the grips adjusted, then Karl proceeds to attach a laser sight to the new pistol.

“There. We can both see how bad you wobble, now. Here, load up a magazine of snap-caps and let's see how you do.”

Ten minutes later, Kel is looking at Karl in wonder. She has been unable to keep the laser from wandering when she squeezes the trigger. Her movement, at a mere ten feet, is a half inch or more, every shot. Karl, however, using his own pistol, has movements of an eighth of an inch or less.

“I guess I've got a lot of improvement, yet,” she says dejectedly.

“Don't be disappointed, Kel,” he replies. “When I started, my movement was about 3cm, or almost an inch and a quarter. Twice as much as you have. Your performance is quite acceptable for this point in your training. In contrast my effort was only fair, at best.”

He grins at her quick improvement in mood, going from dejected to smiling in seconds. She is a good student, and he is quite pleased.

###

Kass knocks on the door frame and sticks his head in. “Did you send for me, Bill?” he asks the owner of Cascade Aviation.

“Sure did, Kass. Come on in and sit down. This is going to take a little while.”

Taking a seat, Kass asks, “What's up?”

Bill Richardson leans back in his chair and looks at his star pilot.

“Kass, I've received a contract offer, but it hinges on you. You have been requested, by name. It's an overseas job and you'll be gone about three months. It's a classified project and I can't tell you much more than that until you accept the job.”

“Can you tell me who I'll be working for?” Kass asks, after a moment of thought.

“It's military. That's all I can say.”

“I'm tempted, Bill. I really am. But I also need to talk to Kel before I accept this, you know.”

“Is she going to cause problems?”

Kass replies slowly. “I don't think so, but I know she's going to be unhappy if I accept this.”

Bill nods, “My wife would react exactly the same way. I know.”

“Is this a 'black' operation, Bill?”

“That I don't know, Kass. It could be, but I simply have no idea.”

“What kind of duties? Test pilot?”

“Pilot, yes. I think it'll be more like certification or acceptance, though, rather than test pilot. A bit less risk.”

“Okay. I can work with that. What's the pay?”

“A lot. Sending you out on contract like this, I'll be getting about half again what I'd make with you here. You'll be making at least that much yourself. There's some leeway built in there, and I think you should push it.”

“Not a bad idea, Bill. Thanks for telling me.”

“Telling you what, Kass?”

“Gotcha,” Kass says with a nod, then continues, “Anything else I should know?”

“Not until you accept,” Bill replies.

“Today is Tuesday. I should have an answer for you by Friday, Bill.”

Standing, Bill says, “Thanks, Kass. I need to make some phone calls, so I'll talk to you later.”

Kass nods, and heads back out to the hanger, where the maintenance furs are prepping the Chinook for him.

###

“Hi, Rick. I need to talk to you before you leave tonight. I have something I want you to think over,” Kass says.

“I've got a few minutes right now, Kass. What's up?” he replies.

Taking a seat on a kitchen stool, Kass looks at the raccoon. “I've just been offered an overseas contract. It's supposed to last about 3 months, and the pay will be excellent. What concerns me is leaving the family for that long.”

Rick pauses in his dinner preparations. “Really?” he asks. “Any idea where?”

“No idea at all. It's a military contract, and classified. How highly, I don't know yet. What's bothering me is that I was requested by name. If I don't go, Cascade doesn't get the contract.”

“That's thought-provoking. If they requested you by name, they know you. I would

expect that means that the Navy is running this one. Any other thoughts?” Rick asks.

Kass gets a pensive look on his face. “Yeah. I'd gotten that far myself. It may be a 'black' contract, which would mean that I will never be able to talk about it. As far as I know, my security clearance is still good, which may be part of the reason they asked for me.”

“I expect that they want you as a pilot, right?”

Kass grins, and replies, “Yep. I asked specifically, and from what Bill told me, I don't think they want me as a test pilot. He said it was more likely to be a certification or acceptance post. That's safer, and, actually, it isn't as dangerous as some of the flying I do at Cascade.”

Rick turns back to his cooking. “Well, that is good to know. How long do you have to give them an answer? And when would you be leaving?”

“I told Bill I'd have an answer for him by Friday. After that, I expect there will be some time while we negotiate the details of the contract. That might be a day or two or a week or two. I doubt it'd take any longer than that. After that, I have no idea. If you want me to guess, I'd say that I probably have between three and six weeks before they want me to leave.”

Rick ponders this. “Okay, that's not too bad. Another thing. Do you think they might want you back in uniform?”

Kass looks stunned. “I did **not** consider that. I have no idea on that one, Rick. Where did the idea come from, anyway?”

I don't want to tell him that the Navy asked me about that. I don't think they care, but Kass could, and I wouldn't blame him. “I don't know, Kass. Just a random thought, I guess. With the Navy asking for you by name, it was just something that came to mind.”

“Rick, if you have any more stunners like that, please hit me with them now, you've already got me reeling and one bout of that is enough, thank you.”

“Any time, Kass. No, I don't have any more thoughts like that. I just tossed it out so you could think about it. I have no idea if they'd ask you back. But you did say that they all tried to keep you from leaving, when you resigned.”

“There is that,” Kass muses aloud. “It could be. I'll have to think on that one. I expect, if they do want me back in the service, that getting back in uniform will be one of the requirements of the contract, as well. I'm not sure I want to go there.”

“Why not? You said you really enjoyed being in the service.”

Kass gives a mild shudder. “Well, one of the big issues is the fact that I'd be expected to travel, probably a lot. I won't go back into black ops, though. I can't. I've given

my heart to Kel, and to you and Gwen. Which means I'm no longer suitable for service there. They would put me someplace where my skills would be useful, though, and that would probably mean one of the larger bases. Which, unless there is an opening at Everett or Whidbey Island, means elsewhere. And I'm not going to count on there being a local opening."

"Oof. You're right about that. Anyway, you can bargain with them and make sure you stay here, at least for a while?"

"Possibly," Kass says reflectively. "Maybe even probably. I could request a transfer to the reserves after this contract, too. That would keep me here."

"Not a bad idea. And that way, you would keep your benefits, too. I think that might be a good idea in any case, don't you?" Rick asks.

"You know, you're right, Rick. I could do that anyway when this contract is up. I might even be able to make some inquiries this week. That's worth investigating. Thank you for the idea."

"Anytime, Kass. You know that. Here, help me get this on the table and then we can call Gwen and Kel. Have you said anything to either of them?"

"No. I wanted to talk to you first, Rick. I know this is going to hurt Kel, I just don't know how much."

"Well, from what you've said, and implied, I think you might be just about ready to pop the question to her. Are you?"

Kass stops dead in his tracks. "Rick. I asked you to give me the rest of your stunners earlier. Why did you wait on this one?" *Do I want to propose now? He's right, I'm just about ready. And that would reassure Kel so very much. It's a good idea, but...am I really ready for that?*

Rick turns around and takes in Kass' expression. "I guess I did take you by surprise with that one, didn't I?" he asks with a grin. "Then again, I think it would be a really good idea."

"What's a good idea?" Gwen asks as she comes up and gets a kiss from Rick.

Seeing Kel approaching, Rick bends over and whispers in her ear, "Kass proposing."

Gwen leans back, her eyes wide. "What brought that on?"

"We'll talk about it later, hon. Let's get supper on the table."

Accepting the change of subject, Gwen takes the dish from his hands and places it on the table. Kel helps Kass at the same time.

“When is Jo-Ann getting home?” Rick asks as they sit down.

“She should have been here by now,” Gwen answers, “if everything went according to plan. Obviously, it didn't. Since she hasn't called, either it's something minor and she'll be here soon, or she is very busy and will call when she gets the chance.”

“Let's hope she gets here soon, then,” Kass replies.

A heartfelt “Yes” is the answer he receives.

Fifteen minutes later, Jo-Ann comes storming through the door from the garage. “What a day! And two-thirds of it taken up with worthless paperwork!” she says in disgust as she stomps through the living room before disappearing down the hall to her room.

When she returns to the living room a few minutes later, Rick gets up and hugs her. “Hey, hon, you're home now. Forget all that nonsense from work. Just leave it there. Okay?”

Sagging in his grasp, she says, “I'll try, Rick, but some of those idiot paper pushers are going to get hammered. I swear.”

Releasing her, Rick guides Jo-Ann to the table. “Elk roast tonight, love, and lots of trimmings. Help yourself.”

Jo-Ann digs in with gusto. “You know, Rick,” she says after swallowing her first bite, “if you keep feeding me like this I'm going to turn into a big, round, fat raccoon.”

“Nah, you'll just burn it off scowling at the paper pushers,” Rick replies with a grin.

Jo-Ann grunts as she turns her full attention to her supper.

Later, with Rick gone to work, the others gather in the living room.

Gwen turns to Kass, and asks, “So, Kass, how was your day?” *I'm sure he'll appreciate the opening. What Rick said means that something major is going on. He is about ready to propose, but I think he'd still like another month or two. If Rick thinks he should propose now, there has got to be a reason.*

Seeing the look in his eyes, Gwen realizes she is right, and that he does appreciate the opening.

“Well, I got a major surprise this afternoon. Bill called me into his office, and told me that Cascade has received a contract offer, on the condition that I accept the job.”

“That's great!” “Congratulations, hon.” “Wow! Good for you!” comes from the femmes.

Holding up a paw, he says, “But there are some things about the contract that I want

to talk about with all of you. Especially Kel.”

Kel sits back. *This is not good. If he needs to talk to me, that means there are things about the contract that I won't like. How bad is it?*

“What do you mean?” she asks, a bit more sharply than she intended.

“Kel, hon, if I accept this, it means I'll be gone for about three months.”

“What?” she screeches, as Gwen and Jo-Ann show their shock.

“Easy, Kel, I haven't accepted yet. And I won't, if you're dead set against it after you know all the facts.”

“What?” she asks more quietly. “You'd do that?”

“Yes. Absolutely,” Kass replies sincerely.

“Oh. Well, what can you tell us, then?”

“Well, to begin with, it's a classified military contract. How highly classified, I have no idea. I do know that it's military, and since they specified me, by name, I expect that it's the Navy, although I don't know for sure.”

“I'm being hired as a pilot. Doing what hasn't been specified, yet. I won't learn any details until after I accept the contract. That tells me that it's probably a 'black' project. Which means I'll never be able to discuss any of it with any of you, ever. On the other hand, they're willing to pay me very well to do this.”

“I know, three months sounds like a long time, and it can be. At the same time, it's not that long, and I think it may be worth it. And for what it's worth, I talked with Rick and while he didn't say, I think he believes it would be a good idea.”

The discussion continues for a couple of hours, with Gwen and Jo-Ann eventually deciding that Kass should take the contract. Kel is not so sure, yet, and wants to talk with him some more, which they do after they go to bed.

###

“So you see, Karl,” Kel says during their lunch break the next day, “if Kass accepts this contract he'll be gone for three months. And there's the chance that they'll want him back in uniform, too.”

“Kel,” he replies, “I know this upsets you. But you have to look at it from his point of view, too. It would be a good thing for him to do this, in my opinion. There are a lot of benefits for you, too. If he goes back into the Navy, that will make you a military dependent, and there are many, many benefits to that.”

“A dependent? We'd have to be married for that...” Her voice trails off.

“Yes, Kel. I would expect that if he does accept this contract, he will also propose to you. For your sake, not his. If you want to get married that quickly, you can, but I would suggest waiting until he's back, and settled back into his life here. Perhaps three or four months later. That gives him a chance to get used to the idea, and gives you much more time to plan, and I think you would like a big wedding. And all of your friends will like it, too.”

“Karl, you're a sneaky old bear, you know that?” she asks as she hugs him affectionately.

“I'm a Russian! Of course I'm sneaky,” he says, returning the hug.

“And I love you anyway. Thanks, Karl, your advice means a lot to me.”

“Kel, you are very special, in many ways. You mean a lot to me, too.”

###

“Good morning, Bill,” Kass says as he enters Bill's office on Friday morning. “I've decided to take the contract.”

“Thank you, Kass. That means a lot to me, and the company. The money is going to be very useful, and a successful military contract is a big plus as well.”

“Bill, can you tell me if it was the Navy that presented this?”

“You know, Kass, I don't know. They were in suits, not uniforms, but the fact that they were military was as plain as your muzzle.”

“I understand that, Bill. But did they give you any hint?”

“No, they didn't Kass. But since you've accepted, I'll call them. I expect they'll be here this afternoon and you can ask for yourself.”

“Just going to throw me to the wolves, huh?” Kass asks with a grin.

“Just like that, you sneaky cat. No wolf is going to put anything over on you, anyway.”

“Well, I wouldn't mind some moral support, anyway. And a little help with the negotiations, too.”

“That I can do. Once they get into briefing you on the contract itself, I expect I'll be excluded.”

“You're probably right, there. Unless you have a top secret clearance?”

“Not any more. It's been too many years. They could update it, of course, but I doubt they'll do that.”

“Don't count on it. You're going to know enough that you just might get updated, Bill. I'll tell you what I can, when I can.”

“Thanks, Kass. I know you've got a couple of flights scheduled today, you'd better get with it.”

###

“Cassy, do you and Mike have anything planned for this evening?” Kass asks as they pack up at the range Sunday afternoon.

“No, we don't have anything planned. Why?” Cassy asks.

“Good. I've made reservations for dinner tonight. It's casual, but dress nice, please.”

“Love to!” Cassy says, a smile stretching across her muzzle. “Where?”

“The Porto Bello. I think I've told you about it.”

“You've mentioned it. Sicilian, isn't it?”

“Sure is. Straight from the old country, too. Mom and Pop packed up and moved to Seattle, and brought the kids. The family runs the place, and Mom and Pop run the kitchen. They've hired some help, but not a lot. The food is really good.”

“Mikey! Get over here!” the bunny calls.

“What's up, hunny-bunny?” he asks as he comes over and hugs Cassy from behind.

“Dinner. Tonight. At the Porto Bello. Kass asked us.”

“Oh, yum! I've been wanting to go there. Thanks, Kass,” he says, pumping the snow leopard's paw.

“Like I told Cassy, it's casual, but dress nice. The reservations are for seven o'clock, so I expect you at the house no later than six.”

“We'll be there. In an hour or two, I expect,” he says, eyeing his wife.

“Or two,” she agrees.

“Okay, you two. Get a room,” Kass says with a grin as he steps away, hearing the giggles behind him.

###

“Buena sera, Mama Cassini!” Kass calls to the matronly ferret at the hostess station.

“Buena sera, Signor Kass!” she answers. “Welcome back. And you bring guests this time!”

“Yes, Mama. Six guests tonight, as you know. Kel, you already know. This is Jo-Ann Procyon, Gwen Coona and her husband, Rick Coona. And these two...”

“Michael Ferretti! You scamp! Whatta you doin' here?” Mama interrupts when she sees the ferret.

Mike, who had flinched when he heard Kass greet their hostess, momentarily tries to hide behind his wife, then realizes it's hopeless.

“Hello, Mama Cassini,” he answers, drooping.

“You still-a stealing the pies from-a the window?” she asks archly.

“No, Mama. I'm married now, and this is my wife, Cassy,” he says, trying to change the subject, and introducing the two femmes.

“Cassy, it is-a a pleasure to meet you. Your name, is it Cassandra? Cassandra Ferretti?”

“Yes, ma'am, that's right,” Cassy says with a blinding smile. She likes this femme, she feels right at home.

As their hostess leads them to their table, Cassy asks her about Mike stealing her pies.

“Ah, that-a Michael. He always a scamp, that-a one. He love-a my rhubarb pie too much. He always take-a one when I bake them. After a while, I bake an extra, just-a for him to take. He like it more when he could-a sneak it.”

Cassy giggles, and the older ferret joins her. “That sounds like my Mikey,” she says. “Stolen treats are sweeter, he says.”

“That's-a Michael,” Mama agrees. “Here is your table,” she continues, talking to all of them. “The manicotti and the veal are especial good tonight.”

“Maria!” she calls. “Signor Kass is here! You serve for him and his guests.”

Maria, a lovely ferret in her late teens, comes up to the table. Mama's youngest daughter, she is also a bit of a vamp, and has enjoyed flirting with Kass many times.

Sashaying up, she starts taking drink orders. When she gets to Mike, she stops. “Michael Ferretti?” she asks with a gasp. “Nicola has been wondering when you'd come in.”

“Nicola?” Mike chokes out. “Oh, my...”

Cassy looks on, an amused smile on her face. “Mikey, who's Nicola?” she asks innocently.

Mike, flustered, tries to answer his wife. “Nicola? Oh, she's an old friend. That's right, an old friend.”

“Oh. An old girl-friend.” Cassy agrees, pleased to see the shock on his face. *This is fun. I get to tease him. Not too much, though.*

As Mike fumbles for an answer, Maria gets the rest of the drink orders and heads for the bar.

Kass and the others remain quiet, watching Mike trying to get out of the situation he's created.

A few minutes later, an older ferret femme, in her late twenties, brings their drinks.

Setting them out, she saves Mike's glass for last. “And for you, Signor Ferretti, my Borgia special,” she says ominously.

Cassy sputters at the comment, then breaks out in laughter at the expression on his face.

“Oh, Mikey! What did you do to this poor femme?” she asks, trying to control herself.

“Oh, nothing much,” Nicola answers. “Just lead me on, fill-a my head with fantasies, keep-a me in-a suspense, promised much. Then he return to America, just like-a that,” she says, snapping her fingers. “That's all. Not a word to me, either, before he left.”

“Hello, Nicola. I'm Cassy, his wife.”

“Pleased to meet you, Cassy. I warn you, he will leave you in a heartbeat.”

“No, I don't think so. If he does, he knows I'll find him and cut his heart out and give it back to him in a candy box.”

Nicola laughs heartily. “That would serve him right. Good Sicilian justice, that's what he needs. I like you, Cassy. Come back often, I think we can be friends.”

Mike has been gasping like a fish out of water at this exchange, and when he opens his mouth to say something, Cassy reaches over, without looking, and pushes his jaw back closed as she continues to talk with Nicola, who smirks at the sight.

Gwen, meanwhile, has a paw stuffed in her muzzle, trying to smother her laughter. Jo-Ann and Kel are copying her, and Kass and Rick are also struggling.

When Nicola strides away, Cassy turns back to the table. Taking in the tableau, she giggles. Looking at Mike with a sly smile, she says, “Nice femme. I like her, Mikey. Why did you leave her?”

As Mike struggles to answer, the table erupts in laughter.

“It's okay, Mikey. I still love you,” Cassy says, endearingly.

Mike finally regains control, and shakes his head resignedly. “I will never live this down,” he mutters.

“No you won't,” Cassy whispers in his ear, as the rest of the crew regains control, wiping away the tears of laughter.

As they all look at the menu, Mama Cassini is in the kitchen, bustling about and getting a rhubarb pie ready.

When Mike cautiously tries his drink, he sputters in outrage. “Borgia special is right! This is quinine water!”

Rick barks out a laugh at the comment, knowing how much Mike detests the bitter stuff. Nicola has served him exactly the right potion.

Excusing himself from the table, Kass heads for the restrooms. Intercepting Maria, he asks her to bring Mike a Rogue Porter with his meal, and asks her to tell Nicola that her 'Borgia special' worked like a charm.

With a smile and a flounce of her skirt, Maria heads off.

Later, after a delectable meal, Maria comes up with a serving tray held high. Setting it down, she proceeds to serve each of them a slice of pie, with Mike getting a double portion.

“Michael, Mama insisted,” she says. “She says you don't-a get to steal this-a one.”

As Mike's muzzle fluffs, the rest of the table laughs gently. Then they all dig into the delicious dessert. And Mike finishes all of his serving.

###

When Kass arrives at Cascade Aviation early on Monday morning, he is surprised to find his boss, Bill Richardson, waiting for him.

“Kass, the contract meeting will start at eight this morning. They apologized for not being able to come in Friday afternoon, again. I think they want you on board pretty bad.”

“Thanks for the heads up, Bill,” Kass replies. “I'll be there.”

At eight o'clock, Bill and Kass enter the conference room with the military furs, and close the door.

After introductions, they all sit down at the table. Kass is across from the three military furs, and Bill is sitting at the head of the table.

The leader of the trio, a sea otter who has introduced himself as Fred Smith, opens the meeting.

“Thank you for meeting with us, Mr. Ujinkhan. As you know, we have requested you, by name, for this contract. There are certain stipulations to this contract. Both you and Mr. Richardson have current security clearances, and the provisions of those clearances are being activated. Nothing that is said in this room shall be mentioned to any unauthorized personnel. Understood?”

“Yes,” Bill says.

“Aye, aye, admiral,” Kass says.

Pinning Kass with an eagle eye, the unmasked admiral asks, “Have we met?”

“No, sir. But I have seen you several times, and you were the subject of a briefing a few years ago.”

“I see. No names, then. And my associates will still be Mr. Jones and Mr. Baker.”

“Aye, aye, sir. Will I see any of you again after this meeting?”

“Perhaps. If there are negotiations that have to be worked out. Otherwise it is very unlikely that you will see me again.”

“Very good, sir. Shall we get to the contract?”

“Yes, Mr. Ujinkhan, we shall.”

Kass interrupts, a paw held up. “Please, for both of our sakes, address me as Kass. It is much simpler, and I am used to it and prefer it.”

“Kass, then. The duration of the contract is three months, with a possible extension of up to another three months.”

“Am I allowed leave during the contract?”

“At the end of the three months, and monthly thereafter, if required.”

“Duration of the leave?” Kass asks.

“Ten days, then five days a month.”

“Acceptable. Next?”

“The location of the facility is classified and will not be revealed until all other conditions of the contract have been met. The details of the duty requirements, likewise.”

“What we can reveal is that this is certification and acceptance testing of a new platform. The skills required include helicopter pilot, scuba certification and experience in covert amphibious operations. There aren't many furs who meet those requirements, Kass, and you are our first choice for this assignment. We are very happy that you've chosen to listen to us.”

“I haven't accepted yet.”

“No. And there are several more requirements still to be addressed.”

“And I imagine one of those requirements is related to my resignation.”

“Very astute, Kass. Yes, it is. Specifically, if you accept, you will be reinstated in service with no loss of time, and with an increase in pay grade, to O-6.”

“O-6?” Kass asks in surprise. “I was an O-4 when I resigned.”

“I know. I also know why you resigned. The requirements of this contract include your promotion. This is a permanent rank. If this contract works out, it will place you in the upper half, as well.”

“I will have to place some stipulations on my service, sir,” Kass states cautiously. “There have been changes in my life, as I am sure you are aware. First, and most importantly, I am no longer psychologically suitable for covert operations, and I will refuse any such assignment.”

“We know and understand your position. Accepted.”

“I wish to remain, to the maximum extent possible, in the Seattle area. I have put down roots here and I am not excited by the prospect of pulling them up.”

“That also has been considered. After the contract is complete, and if you wish to remain in service, we will be locating a training facility for this new platform in Everett. You will be commander of that facility.”

Kass gulps. “Command, sir?”

“Why? Can't you handle that?”

“I can, sir. It's just a rather large surprise.”

“It's appropriate for your new rank, Captain.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I believe we can commit ourselves to leaving you in command of the new facility for a minimum of two years and possibly up to four years. Is that acceptable?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. You will be training a lot of your old teammates, among others. Keep any informal meetings out of the training schedule. If you want to party with them, do it after the training is complete.”

“Of course, sir. I would have anyway.”

“I'm glad to hear it, Captain. You will be expected to attend the War College and some other specialized training, later.”

“Yes, sir. There is the matter of pay, sir. And my reporting date.”

“Yes. You will receive full pay and benefits as an O-6, effective today. Back pay for the time since your resignation will also be forthcoming. For the duration of this contract only, you may also accept pay as a contractor and employee of Cascade Aviation. Since this operation is off-shore, all pay, including the back-pay, will be tax-free. This is a special proviso that will not occur again. You will report for transport on 16 February.”

“And the amount of that additional pay, sir?” Kass asks.

“Getting a bit mercenary, Captain?” the admiral asks quietly.

“A bit, sir. My...ah...future wife is in training for the Olympics sir, and I am supporting her. Financial considerations are important, sir.”

“Fiancée, Captain?”

“Not yet, sir. At least not formally, although we have discussed it. I'm planning on asking her very soon.”

“Congratulations. Don't delay asking, if you want my advice. What sport will she be competing in?”

“Pistol, sir. She out shot me with my own pistol, and that was before she started training.”

“Impressive. Who's her coach?”

“Karl Ursiris, sir.”

“Very impressive. Perhaps I can encourage some additional support for her.”

“That would be appreciated, sir.”

“I’ll do what I can. Any other questions?”

“No, sir. I am on board, sir.”

“Good. My associates will return tomorrow with your new ID card and orders, and additional information, and you are back on active duty as of now. You will not need to be in uniform until you depart.”

They then request that Bill leave the room, as the remainder of the briefing does not involve him, and includes need-to-know information that he shouldn't have.

Later, after the Navy furs leave, Bill catches up with Kass. “Well, that was a bit different.”

“No doubt about it, Bill. I think I'm in shock.”

“You should be. A two-grade jump is pretty rare these days.”

“And movement to the upper half is significant, too.”

“I'm an old Army man. What does that mean?” Bill asks.

“Upper half is a designation for furs who are being considered for a star. If I pull this assignment off, and get the job done right as school commander, then I'll probably get a star myself not too long afterward.”

“Well, Admiral, may I be the first to congratulate you.”

Kass chuckles, albeit a bit grimly. “You're pretty premature, but I thank you.”

“Captain, then. I hate to lose you, Kass, but this is something you need to do. And it is a much better career move than staying with me.”

“Bill, I really appreciate that. I've enjoyed my time here, and I'd like to come back now and then, when I've got the time. I certainly want to keep in touch with you. You're my friend.”

“Thanks, Kass. That goes both ways.”

“Well, boss, I have a chopper to get in the air, and I'm sure you have a pile of paper on your desk. We'd both better get to it.”

###

“Hi, sweetie,” Kel says as Kass comes into the living room. “How did it go?”

“Hi, love,” Kass says, bending over to give her a kiss. “It was a decent day. The weather cooperated and there weren't any problems.”

Kel reaches out and grabs him, pulling him back down. “That is not what I was asking about, and you know it, joker. Now. How did the meeting go?”

Kass grins to himself. “Oh. That. It went okay.”

Kel maintains her hold, and gets up. Shifting her grip, she takes firm hold of the fur on his chest, just below his throat. Pulling his head down, she says in a steely voice, “Enough. Tell. Me. How. It. Went. And what happened. In detail.”

“Can I get comfortable first?” he asks.

“You can strip down right here while you start talking. If I let you get out of sight, I'll have to go through this all over again, and I'm tired. I don't want to. Now give.”

Quickly stripping down, Kass starts telling her about the meeting.

“I accepted the contract, and I'll be leaving February 16th. I'll be gone three months. If there are problems, they can extend the contract up to another three months. If that happens, I get ten days leave at the three month point, and five days a month after that.”

“What will you be doing,” Kel asks. “Flying?”

“I'm afraid that falls under the 'do not tell' provision, sweetie. It's classified, and right now I can't tell you. It is a certification and acceptance job, not test pilot. That's a lot safer.”

“Well, that's good, anyway. Any idea where you'll be going?”

“Again, I can't say. I can tell you it's in the middle of nowhere on an island. They're supposed to bring me my orders tomorrow. I don't think I'll be able to tell you much more, other than in general terms.”

Kel looks at him intently. “Orders? As in military orders? Did they reinstate you?”

“Sort of. It seems that my resignation was never processed all the way. So, for the last year and a half or so, I've been on 'detached duty', I think they phrased it.”

“Hmph. Sounds like typical military blundering, if you ask me. And what do you mean, sort of?” Kel says with a snort.

“Well, they promoted me, too. Surprised me with that. I'm supposed to get my back pay, too.”

“I'll believe that when I see it,” she replies. “So, you're a commander now?”

“Nope. Captain. I'll have to buy new uniforms, too. Do you sew?”

“Captain?” Kel yells. “They made you a captain? How did that happen?”

The yell brings Gwen, Rick and Jo-Ann in, just in time to hear the last question.

“You made captain?” Rick asks. “Congrats. That's wonderful.”

“Yes, Kass, congratulations,” Gwen says, with a hug and a kiss.

“See, I told you that the Navy knew you were a keeper,” Jo-Ann adds as she gives him her own hug and kiss. “That's great. So what's next?”

“Let's see. I get my new ID card tomorrow, along with my orders. After I figure that out, I'll need to hit the BX at Everett and get new uniforms and such. Don't think I'll need a dress or full dress uniform yet, but that will come. Class A's for sure, and some bdu's. I'll have to figure out the rest of it as I go.”

###

“Don't worry, honey,” Kel tells Kass the next morning. “I'll take care of the condo while you're gone. No problems. Gwen and Jo-Ann can help me. It'll be okay. You'll see.”

Kass scowls at her across the breakfast table. “That's what I'm afraid of. You'll 'take care' of it. That scares me.”

“Oh, pooh. You know we won't do anything you won't like. You're just being paranoid.”

“Hmph.”

“Honey, you know we won't hurt you. Or hurt your condo. You know that, don't you?”

Kass relaxes a bit. “Yeah, I suppose so. It's just that I've seen so many disasters before.”

“I won't do that to you. Please believe me. You know you like what I've done so far.”

“Okay. I give. Just take it easy, huh?” he asks.

“I will. Now, come on, or we're going to be late. Gwen and Rick are expecting us for barbecue.”

Kass nods. “Okay, let's go.” *There's going to be a surprise, too. Just for you, sweetheart.*

###

It is mid-afternoon on Saturday, and everyone is lounging around the living room at CCN after a typically delicious Coona family grill-out, talking and enjoying the time they spend together.

Kass gets up and excuses himself, disappearing down the hall. Returning a few minutes later, he stops in the kitchen and gets refills for Kel and himself, setting his drink down on the end table and hers on the coffee table.

Something about the way he's acting catches Rick's attention, and when Kass suddenly drops to one knee in front of Kel, he gasps, drawing everyone's attention to the scene.

Looking into Kel's wide, startled eyes, Kass presents a diamond engagement ring as he asks, "Kelso Amanda Vixxen, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?"

Chapter 21

Departure

Kel lets out a little “Eep!”, almost a squeak, as Kass goes down on his knee. She is stunned. For a moment, she can't even breathe. Tears of joy streaming from her eyes, she nods emphatically, joyously in answer to his question. Jumping off the couch into his arms and knocking him onto his back, she smothers him with kisses of joy and passion as they sprawl on the floor, rendering both of them breathless until she finally surfaces to breathe.

“Yes. YES! YES!” she yells, then kisses him again.

After a moment, Rick starts clapping, causing Gwen to look at him in amazement. Seeing his expression, she smiles at him and joins his applause. Jo-Ann, Cassy and Mike also join in, as Rick calls, “Well done, Kass! Well done indeed.”

As the others add their own approbation, Kass gently ends the kiss, urging Kel to her feet and joining her. With a small bow, not much more than a tip of the head, he accepts the applause graciously, accepting their love and encouragement.

Kel watches with bemusement as he gently removes the Promise Ring from her finger, and replaces it with her new engagement ring, ending the gesture by kissing her paw.

Stepping up beside her, he looks down into her eyes and says, “Well, my love, I have done my part. The rest of it is up to you.”

When she looks up at him without understanding, he sighs. “Isn't it true that the bridegroom should be seen, just barely, before the wedding, and heard not at all?”

Gwen comes up and tells him, “Sometimes. It depends on the bride and this one is just a bit too stunned to make plans yet. Scoot, you. Let us femmes in here.” She gives him a gentle shove in the general direction of Rick and Mike and turns her attention to Kel.

Jo-Ann and Cassy come up and push Kass the rest of the way out, crowding around Kel, congratulating her and admiring her new ring, as the henfest begins.

Rick and Mike move Kass to the kitchen and sit him down.

“Well done, Kass,” Rick says again. “You handled that extremely well, although you surprised all of us with your timing. Thank you for including us.”

Kass shakes his head to clear it. “I knew she'd react like that, and I thought it would be a good idea if she had other femmes around to bring her back down to earth. I was protecting both of us from overreacting, mostly.”

“Still, it was a good idea,” Mike puts in. “What would you like to drink?”

“My drink is in the living room, and I imagine it would be worth my life to go back in there right now.”

“You could be right,” Rick observes. “So what would you like?”

“I'm pretty sure I'll be driving later, so it needs to be non-alcoholic. I had some ice tea. Whatever's available will do.”

Mike opts for coffee and the other two join him.

“So, Kass, planning on getting married in uniform?” Rick asks.

Kass grins, a bit ruefully. “You know, it's really up to the bride. But I think she'll like that idea. So, probably yes.”

“Has she seen you in uniform yet?”

“Nope. No fur has, except the tailor when he was checking the fit. I don't need to wear it until I leave on this contract, so I really haven't planned on it.”

“Well, I can tell you that Gwen and Jo-Ann definitely want to see you dressed up, and I'm certain Kel will want to, too. And I doubt,” he says, glancing at Mike, “that Cassy will be willing to miss it. I think you'd better plan on it. I think tomorrow would be a good day. When we get back from the range.”

Kass grimaces. “I hope you're wrong, Rick, but somehow I doubt it. I don't enjoy being in the monkey suit, but it's part of the job description. That's one of the reasons I liked the SEALs, it was bdu's or dungarees - about ninety-five percent of the time.”

“Well, you're the captain, and I imagine you'll be able to make the rules a lot of the time, so I wouldn't worry about it too much. Just be ready tomorrow.”

“Hmph. Guess I'd better dig out the fruit salad then and get it dusted off, too.”

Mike asks, “Fruit salad?”

“It's a nickname for the award ribbons that represent the medals a fur has earned. They are worn on your chest. And I have a fair number. Which I don't like to wear.”

“Oh. Standing in formation and knowing which paw to salute with?”

Kass laughs, obviously releasing some tension. “Thanks, Mike. I needed that. I'm not aware of any medals for those skills. Most of mine are combat awards, including

a few too many Purple Hearts.”

“Why don't you like to wear them, Kass?” Rick asks.

“Because I get too much attention, damn it,” Kass answers, grumpily.

Rick looks thoughtful and stops for a moment, then quietly asks, “CMH?”

“Yeah. Causes me no end of grief, most of the time,” Kass grouches.

“I can see that. Don't you think you deserve it?”

“I suppose so. No, not really. I was just doing what had to be done. Some fur saw it and reported it, and it's been an albatross around my neck ever since.”

“Kass, they never would have awarded it if they weren't positive beyond any doubt that you deserved it. Stop doubting yourself like that. It doesn't do you any good and it detracts from you in ways that aren't good. So just stop. Okay?”

“There are a lot of other furs that deserve it more than I do.”

“Quite possibly. And I'll bet every one of them is dead. And this is called 'survivor guilt', which I'm sure you know all too much about. I also know that award is commonly called a “Coffin with Metal Handles” in the service, because it's awarded posthumously so often.”

Mike has been following this without really understanding it, then the light dawns. “CMH? Do you mean a Medal of Honor?” he asks.

Kass turns to him. “Yeah. Want to shout it from the rooftops, while you're at it?” he growls.

Mike's eyes widen at the anger in Kass' voice, even though he knows it's not aimed at him.

Rick steps in and says, “Mike, think about it. You know how private Kass is. That medal makes him a celebrity and gives him about the same amount of privacy as a Hollywood star. How would you like that?”

Mike shudders. “Not at all.” Turning to Kass, he apologizes. “Kass, I'm sorry. I didn't realize.”

Kass' expression can best be described as chagrined. “It's okay, Mike. I know that. It's kind of a reflex action, I guess. I really detest being in the spotlight. And I'm going to have to be there a lot, now.”

“Huh?” Mike responds.

“When this contract is done, they're putting me in command of a new training facility, up in Everett. Being the commander means I'll be in the spotlight for real at first, and periodically afterwards. Thankfully, I believe the school and the training will be classified to some degree, especially at first, and that will lower my profile somewhat. I think the thing that bothers me the most is having my name and picture published. I have made enemies, and some of them might decide to come after me when I'm that easily located. I hope not, but it's possible.”

“Then let the commander of base security know that, Kass. It's his job, after all. And you can probably make arrangements in other ways, too. I know I would.”

“That brings up another point, Rick. When I'm appointed commander of the school, I will be expected to take quarters on base. Not doing so would be ... impolitic, is the best term I can come up with.”

“You're right about that, Kass,” Rick says with a smile.

“So, I should probably sell the condo. Know any fur that might be interested?” Kass says, his head swiveling to pin Mike with his gaze.

Rick turns his gaze on Mike, as well.

“Who, me?” Mike asks, his eyes wide.

“Why not?” Kass replies. “I know you, and I know that you and Cassy are going to need more room soon, if you don't already. I think we can work out some terms that will suit both of us. It may not be the most convenient of locations, but it isn't bad. And it's definitely larger than your apartment.”

Looking like a deer caught in the headlights, Mike stutters, “I, I'll have to, to check with Cassy. Yeah, check with Cassy.”

“Do that, Mike. Let me know what you decide,” Kass says. “I'll let you do the search for financing, though. The rest of it will be as minimal as I can arrange.”

“You don't have to be in too big a hurry, I won't be able to get base housing until after I get married. I have no idea when that will be. That is something that is certainly up to the bride.”

“What's up to the bride?” Kel asks as she comes into the kitchen.

“The wedding date, dear,” Kass says, leaning back and giving her a kiss.

Sitting down in his lap and draping her arms around his neck, Kel says, “I haven't

thought that far yet. When would you like?"

"Your choice, dear, like I said. I'm willing to get married tomorrow, or next year, or any other time you choose. Whenever you decide."

Poking him in the ribs, Kel answers, "I don't think either of those is going to happen. One is too soon and the other is much too late. I don't know if you want to get married before you leave on this contract."

"I just told you, love. It really doesn't matter to me. It's your choice. The wedding is, after all, the bride's show. If you'd like, you can even plan a June wedding. If that's your choice, I'll just arrange to be here if the contract is still running then."

When Kel's eyes light up, Kass suspects that is exactly when she'll choose.

###

When Rick arrives at Open Season that evening, with Kass reluctantly in tow, he heads immediately for the ship's bell behind the bar. Kel is already there, and waves at them as she goes to deliver a tray of drinks. Rick waits until she's heading back to move behind the bar.

Kass takes a seat at the bar, shaking his head. Knowing what's coming, he flattens his ears tight to his skull as Rick rings the bell with vigor.

"Attention, everyone! May I have your attention, please! It is my great pleasure to announce that our lovely vixen waitress, Kel, is officially off the market!"

Drawn out of his office by the bell, Max is momentarily nonplussed by Rick's announcement, even though he knew this was coming. Gathering himself together, he descends on the bar, where a gaggle of femmes has quickly surrounded Kel.

Coming up to Kass, he says, "I suppose I can blame this on you. Are you going to let her stay around?"

"Take it easy, Max. I have no intention of dragging her off anywhere. In fact, I'll be dragging myself out of here shortly. I've just taken a contract that will have me out of the country for three months and possibly longer."

"How does your new fiancée feel about that?"

"She's not exactly thrilled, but then again, it was the reason I didn't delay proposing any longer."

"What's the contract?"

“Classified. I can tell you that I'll be working for the Navy, and that they've reinstated me in service.”

“Congratulations, I suppose,” Max says. “What'll you be doing after you finish the contract?”

“They're going to set up a new training facility up in Everett, and I'll be in command. At that point I should be able to tell you more.”

“Command, huh?” Max asks. “That is cause for congratulations. Along with your engagement. I had an idea that you were an officer. Commander?”

“Thanks, Max. Actually, the rank is Captain, now. They've guaranteed me two years at the school, possibly more. Depends on the situation at the time. So we'll be around for a while, yet.”

“When's the wedding?” Max asks.

“I haven't been officially informed, Max, but don't be surprised if it's some time in June.”

“Good. That gives me some time to plan your bachelor party, then. And it will give Kath plenty of time to plan the bachelorette party and the wedding shower. I warn you, she's going to mother-hen you to death.”

“I heard what she did for Mike and Cassy, Max. I think I'll survive. Although, since I'm going to be out of the country, Kel is the one that will have to survive.”

Max chuckles. “Yeah, lucky you. Well, forewarned is forearmed, I guess. At least you have given me enough notice that I can do some planning, unlike these other two. That grinning raccoon over there came back from his folks' place already married, without any warning at all. Mike and Cassy were a little better, but not much. I guess I'll have to take it out on you.”

Kass leans against the bar and grins at the stodgy badger in his omnipresent gray suit. “Knock yourself out, Max. I can survive pretty much anything you throw at me, and I think I'll enjoy most of it.”

Max takes Kass' paw and pumps it. “Congratulations, Kass. You have made a wonderful choice, and made a very special vixen extremely happy. Thank you.”

“You're welcome, Max. I've made myself pretty happy, too.”

###

Kass is waiting for Rick when he gets home that night.

“Hi, Kass. Up rather late, aren't you?”

“I was waiting for you, Rick. Something occurred to me, and I wanted to talk with you about it before I mentioned anything to anyone else.”

“Mind if I get comfortable, first?” Rick asks.

“No, go ahead. It's not urgent.”

Returning a few minutes later, Rick sits down with Kass and asks, “Okay, what's on your mind?”

“Well, Rick, it started with a comment Gwen made while we were in Snoqualmie. When you toasted all of us, Gwen said that all of us were family, and she definitely included Mike and Cassy in that.”

“I suppose what I'm asking is, do we want to make that official? Ask them to become part of the Coona family and give them Family Rings, too?”

Rick sits up abruptly. “That's an eye-opener, Kass. And now that you've mentioned it, I think it's a darned good idea. You said you haven't mentioned this to anyone?”

“Nope. Not even Gwen or Kel. I wanted to ask you first. After all, you are the head of this circus we know as the Coona family. If you like it, then you can ask the others. I brought it up, so you know I'm in favor.”

“Thanks, Kass. That is, I believe, an oversight we should correct. Is Gwen still up?”

Kass looks thoughtful for a moment. “I believe so. You can check the den.”

Returning a few minutes later with Gwen in tow, Rick is talking as they walk up. “Hon, Kass just hit me between the eyes with something. I'll let him explain.”

“What do you have, Kass?” Gwen asks as she sits down.

“Well, like I told Rick, I was thinking about something you said while we were in Snoqualmie, after Rick proposed the toast to all of us. You said that everyone there was family. And you definitely included Mike and Cassy in that. What I'm asking is, should we make that official?”

Gwen's eyes light up and sparkle like emeralds. “Absolutely! What a wonderful idea, Kass! Let's do it.”

“Jo-Ann and Kel are both asleep, and I think we should let them sleep. We can ask them in the morning. If they agree, which I'm pretty sure they will, I think Valentine's Day would be the perfect time to do that. Don't you?” Kass asks.

“Perfect!” Gwen squeals, jumping up and giving him a hug and a kiss. “That is so right, Kass. Thank you so much for bringing this up. We really need to do this.”

“And with that, I am off to bed, myself. I'll leave you and Rick to plan out the dirty deed. Good night, all.”

“Good night, Kass,” Rick says, “and thank you for a wonderful idea.”

###

Looking in the mirror that Sunday afternoon, Kass surveys his appearance critically. Nodding, he approves and gathers himself before going out to show the femmes himself in uniform.

When he steps into the living room, there is a moment of silence before Kel croons, low and sweet, “I just love a fur in uniform.”

Cassy says, “Mmmm, you got that right, Kel. I do, too.”

Jo-Ann starts to agree, then stops suddenly, peering intently at him. Then she gets up abruptly, draws herself to attention and renders a picture-perfect salute.

Kass returns the salute, mirroring her performance. Then nods. “What branch of service, Jo-Ann?”

“The Navy, sir. Four years in the Shore Patrol,” she says as she approaches and examines his rows of ribbons. “That is an impressive collection of ribbons, Kass. I've never seen all of them together at once. And there are several that I don't recognize.”

“Jo-Ann, I was the point of the spear for a good number of years. Believe me, they were all earned the hard way. The extras are probably my foreign awards.”

“Not just out on the pointy end, Kass? But the point itself?”

“That's right. It wasn't a lot of fun, but it needed doing and I was there and could do it. So I did.”

“How much can you talk about it?” she asks.

“Very little, actually. I was in black ops for over a decade, and everything I did there is either 'burn before reading' or 'if I tell you I'll have to kill you afterwards.’”

“What is this all about, Jo-Ann?” Kel asks.

“He hasn't talked to you about his awards?” she asks. Answering herself, she continues, “Of course he hasn't, or you wouldn't be asking. The one on top, all by itself? The light blue one with the five little stars? Any idea what it is?”

“No,” Kel replies, shaking her head.

“Cassy?” Jo-Ann asks.

“Not a clue,” the bunny replies.

“Gwen?”

When she shakes her head in the negative, Jo-Ann asks, “Kass, may I?”

When he nods, she continues, “That, my friends, is the Congressional Medal of Honor. Below it is every award for valor that the Navy offers. Every last one, from the Navy Cross to the Bronze Star. Most of them more than once. I don't know about the rest of you, but I am very, very impressed. I wasn't aware that any fur had all of them, to say nothing of a fur I know, love, and respect.”

At this point, Rick adds, “I learned about that yesterday, and I am every bit as impressed as Jo-Ann. I may not be a veteran, but I do know what those medals mean to the Navy and to me, and respect doesn't begin to express my admiration, Kass.”

Mike adds, “Rick just said it all, Kass. That is how I feel, too.”

“Me, too,-” Cassy says.

Kel gets up and approaches Kass, eyeing him up and down. “You look wonderful, honey. Why didn't you tell me?”

Gathering her in his arms, Kass hugs Kel close. “I thought that was all over and done with, sweetie, and I didn't see any reason to bring it up.”

“Kel, haven't you learned yet how private he is?” Rick asks. “He won't volunteer information, you have to ask the questions. If you don't ask, he isn't going to say anything.”

“I know, Rick,” she answers, “but I didn't realize what it really meant. Now I do.” Then she hugs Kass very tightly. “I love you so much.”

###

“So, Kel,” Karl says, “now that you are an old engaged femme, do you want to

keep on training with me?"

Kel, her smile so wide it's approaching her ears, says, "Of course I do, Karl. You should know that. As to that 'old engaged femme' line, I think I'll just ignore it for now. Later, I'll get you back."

"I tremble in fear," Karl replies, putting his words into action and huddling and trembling before her.

"Oh, you," Kel answers, swatting at him. "You're as bad as Kass."

"Oh, no, miss, I'm much worse than he could ever be. After all, I've had a lot more practice. I'm much older and I used to live with the KGB."

"There is that," Kel admits with a chuckle. "I think I'm worse, though."

"No doubt about it, Missy," Karl says with a chuckle of his own. "In your own way, you are definitely worse. But I prefer you to them."

"I think that's a compliment, Karl," she answers.

"Oh, it is. I also think you are very, very happy right now. Your snow leopard has finally proposed. And I know you said yes, because I can see that marvelous ring. Have you had it appraised?"

"No. And I'm not going to. Kass said he has insured it, and that's good enough for me."

"He's smart to do that. Now you have to be smart enough to keep it. There are thieves out there who would cut off your paw for that rock. It's huge."

"I know," Kel replies, "it's a carat and a half. I also carry, and I've been studying with Kass, so my self-defense skills are getting reasonable. I think I can make any would-be thief think twice."

"That's very good, Kel. I'm glad to hear it. Just be aware, please. I do not want to find out that you've been mugged and left in an alley someplace."

Kel pauses for a second, then says, "Actually, you don't want Kass to find that out. He would, quite literally, dismember the perpetrators if he caught them. I've seen him in action and it is frightening. And he was on my side that day."

"Oh? When was this?" Karl asks.

"You remember that incident a few months ago, when two couples were attacked by a bunch of purists, down on The Ave? That was us. Kass, me, Rick Coona and his

wife, Gwen. Rick took out two of them and Kass took out six. I got one and one got away, for a while. He's in jail with the survivors, now.”

“I remember that. The security camera footage was very impressive. So that was you and your friends ... I think I'm going to stay on your good side, young femme. It's much healthier that way.”

“Actually, stay on Kass' good side, he's the one you need to worry about. But if he's on your side, then the opposition is in serious trouble.”

“True enough, although I also remember how you 'took care of one'. Now, let's see how steady you are today.” With that, they turn their attention to her training.

Later, after lunch, Karl turns to Kel. “Let's pack up that new pistol and see what you can do with it. Okay?”

Kel turns to him, amazed. “You mean I actually get to shoot today?”

“Yes, I think it's time,” he replies, grinning.

“Yippee! Let's go!” she says, ready almost instantly.

Karl picks up a stack of five-bullseye targets, and leads her out to his car.

Returning from the range several hours later, they are deep in discussion.

“Kel, you did very well today. It only took one target to get the sights adjusted on the pistol, and then you shot very well indeed. I know you will continue to improve as we continue training. I know it doesn't seem like there's that much room to improve, but I know you know better than that, too.”

“That's right, Karl, and I'll have you know I love this pistol. I know that I hear about groups measured in thousandths of an inch, and darned few of those. I don't know how you measure that close, but I also know I was nowhere near that standard today.”

“Groups like that are shot with a rifle, Kel, and they're measured with a special x-ray system. Pistols are seldom measured that way. Pistol results are usually listed as a score and so many 'x's. That means you shot a specific numerical score and that a certain number of those shots were in the x-ring. For example, a good one hundred round score might be 998-95x. Your goal should be every shot in the x-ring. If you can do that, it would make your score 1000-100x. And I think you have the skill to attain that. It has been done, but it is rare and I have never heard of a fur shooting consecutive perfect rounds. You can, if you maintain your focus. You have as much potential as I've ever seen, young femme.”

“Thank you, Karl. That is an amazing compliment. I will do my best to live up to

it.”

###

“Here we are, Kel. Let's see what they have to offer, shall we?” Kass asks as they enter the jewelry store.

“Is this where you got my ring?” she asks.

“Yes, and they're holding the wedding bands that go with it. If you prefer a different set, we can make the change very easily. I chose this set because I thought you'd like it.”

“Let's see what they have, hon. Then I'll make up my mind.”

Sometime later, Kel has to admit that Kass' choice is the one she likes the best. “Sweetie, I find it hard to believe, but you actually did make the right choice without me. I do like this set the best.”

Kass smiles at her as the jeweler makes notes on resizing the rings, and they settle up the bill before leaving.

“Kass, did you really have to spend that much?” Kel asks as they leave the shop.

“No, dear, but I wanted you to have a wedding set you'd be proud of, and this was the best choice I could find. You're right, it is a bit on the expensive side, but I do have the money and I couldn't be happier spending it on you.”

Stopping in the middle of the sidewalk and throwing her arms around him, she kisses him passionately. “I love you!” she declares to the world.

###

Rick is bustling around CCN, making sure that all the preparations are in order. It is Valentine's Day, and Mike and Cassy are soon to arrive to celebrate the day.

Gwen stops him as he circles through the living room again. “Calm down, honey,” she says. “Everything is all right. We've done all of the preparations, and we haven't missed anything. You don't want to make Mike and Cassy nervous, do you?”

“No, hon. I need to make myself less nervous,” Rick answers.

“Rick, you've got a good half hour or more before they get here, so go and do a meditation to calm yourself,” Kass tells him. “We can handle the rest of it. You go relax a bit. Do a water meditation.”

“Okay, Kass. You're right. Please call me when they arrive.”

“Will do. Now scat,” Kass says, dismissing him. His military mannerisms have been returning since his re-entry into the Navy, to no one's surprise.

When the doorbell rings a bit later, Jo-Ann is the closest, so she answers.

Greeting Mike and Cassy, she says, “Come on in and make yourselves at home. Take off your skin and rattle around in your bones.”

Cassy wrinkles her nose at the raccoon. “Terrible rhyme, Jo-Ann, but we appreciate the sentiment. We'll be out in a few minutes.”

“We'll all be waiting,” Jo-Ann replies as Kass heads down the hall to get Rick.

When Rick emerges, he is visibly calmer, and he thanks Kass for the suggestion about meditation. Then he heads for the kitchen to make the last minute preparations for the barbecue.

When Mike and Cassy emerge, the party gets going, and Kass and Rick start cooking after asking what each of them want.

When they sit down at the table, they are all amazed at the selections available.

Jo-Ann has her all-time favorite, alder-smoked salmon, with Rick's special herb rub, Cassy has a special vegetarian stir-fry that Kass has made especially for her. Gwen and Kel are sharing steak sashimi, and Rick and Kass are working on a pair of buffalo steaks. Mike is happily devouring an elk steak with a new, special rub that Rick has whipped up just for him.

And of course, the selection of side dishes is as extensive and delicious as always.

Later, with drinks in paw, they sit and relax in the living room.

When Rick gets up, some time later, they all look at him.

“Mike, Cassy, when we invited you over today, to celebrate Valentine's Day, we had more than one reason for doing so,” he says. “We wanted you here for that reason, of course, because today is a day for sharing love and we all love you both.”

“But there is another reason, as well. And for that, we need to go back to our Christmas vacation, and a comment Gwen made while we were in Snoqualmie. When I toasted us all, she said “Everyone here is family”. And she was right. Now, we would all like to make it official. Will you join us, as members of the Coona family?” he asks, as he presents them with their Family Rings.

Mike and Cassy are, to put it mildly, stunned. Looking around in amazement, they see welcoming smiles on every face, and a unanimous, unspoken appeal: "Please join us."

Looking at each other, they can instantly tell that they are in agreement, and turning back to Rick, Mike struggles to talk. When he is unable to get the words out, so strong is his emotion. Cassy touches his arm, then speaks for both of them.

"Rick, we love you all. And we are very honored by what you have asked us. Our answer is yes. We are overjoyed to become members of your family."

Gwen gets up and joins Rick, taking Mike's ring as she does. Then she and Rick approach Mike and Cassy and place the rings on their fingers.

"Welcome to the Coona family," Gwen says to Mike with a gentle and loving smile, and a kiss, as Rick echoes her, with Cassy.

"Wow!" Mike says reverently. "This is so, so..."

"Mike, honey, this is wonderful, isn't it?" Cassy asks him as he searches for words.

Turning to his wife, he kisses her lovingly, then says, "Wonderful doesn't begin to describe it, hunny-bunny. An absolute and total surprise doesn't, either. But both of them are so completely true. Thank you, thank you all," he finishes, his tone saying as much, or even more than, his words, as he looks around at all of them.

###

Two days later, Kass is standing in the living room of CCN, waiting for the taxi that will take him to Whidbey Island for his flight.

All of the Coona family is there to wish him on his way, including the newest members, Mike and Cassy.

The femmes are, without exception, teary, and Kel is openly crying. Kass is trying to comfort her, but they both know that the effort is useless. Nonetheless, he tries.

"Honey, I will call you as often as I can. I made a satellite phone one of my requirements, for exactly that reason. While it is possible to call me from a normal phone, you will have to go through the Navy, at Everett, to do it. In an emergency, do it. Don't hesitate. It will go through. If it doesn't, I'll have some fur's head on a pole. I will call you as often as I can. I don't know if I'll be able to call every day, but I will do my best, and I guarantee I'll call at least twice a week. Okay?"

Sniffing, Kel nods into his chest without breaking her hold on him.

A moment later, she pushes back, and looks up at him. "I'm sorry, honey, I shouldn't be getting your uniform all wet."

"It's okay, sweetie, it'll dry, and I don't care. I won't have the satellite phone turned on unless I'm using it, so calling it won't really help. You, Rick and Gwen all have the contact information to give to the Navy if there's an emergency. There won't be any emergencies at my end, they're not allowed. By my orders."

Trying to smile at his attempt at humor, Kel grins weakly. "Okay, you mean old Captain, you. I love you."

"I love you, too. And I'll be back in time for my wedding, wench, so you be sure to have it all ready to go."

"Aye, aye, sir," she manages to smile.

Just then, the taxi blows its horn in the driveway. Rick takes Kass' bags as he goes out to meet it while Kass says good-bye to the rest of the family. He gets hugs and teary kisses from Gwen, Jo-Ann and Cassy, and a firm handshake and a hug from Mike, then he hugs and kisses Kel one more time. She wraps her arm around his waist and they all go out to the taxi.

The driver, a badger, has loaded the baggage in the trunk, and he waits as Kass says good-bye to Rick, and gives Kel one last, lingering kiss before he gets in and they leave.

A couple of miles down the road, the taxi driver looks in the mirror at Kass. "That was quite a send-off, Captain," he observes.

"Yes, it was, wasn't it?" Kass answers. "It will be hard, being away from all of them. It'll be harder on them, it's the first time I've been away."

"Oh?" the cabbie asks. "Since you're a Captain, I'd assumed that they would be used to it."

"I've only just become engaged," Kass tells him, "and there are some other aspects, too, that I can't talk about."

"Good enough, sir," the badger answers, "I know when to keep quiet."

"No, it's okay. But let's change the subject, shall we?"

###

When he enters the lounge to await his flight, Kass is greeted by his new assistant,

a sea otter named Jeff Salters that he has known for years, and who was his chief of staff when he was with the SEALs.

“Good morning, Captain,” that worthy says with a punctilious salute.

“Good morning yourself, Chief,” Kass says as he returns the salute. “At ease.”

“How are you doing, Jeff?” Kass asks as they sit down and relax.

“Just fine, sir. And it's wonderful to see you back in uniform. The stripes are a bit of a surprise, though.”

“You aren't the only one surprised by these,” Kass says as he brushes the four stripes around his cuffs. “You could have knocked me over with a feather when they told me. I see you've gotten an extra stripe yourself.”

“Yes, sir. Senior Chief Salters now. It feels good sir, and Susan appreciates the extra money, too.”

“I'm sure she does. How's she doing these days?”

“Just fine, sir. My oldest, Jeff Jr., just got an appointment to Annapolis. I think he'll make it. The younger ones are all doing fine.”

“He should,” Kass says. “Jeff's got a good head on his shoulders, and I doubt he has any real surprises coming at him, unlike a civilian. Any of the others showing interest in a Naval career?”

“Not yet, sir. I think Bill, the middle one, will. The two girls, I just don't know.”

“They'll sort it out, Jeff. You know that.”

“I know. It's just a bit nerve-wracking sometimes.”

“I don't doubt it at all. I suppose I'll find out for myself, in a few years.”

“You, sir? The bachelor to end all bachelors?”

“Me, sir. Yes. I got engaged five weeks ago, and the wedding is planned for June. Don't have an exact date yet, but I'm sure I'll be informed.”

“Congratulations, sir! I'm sure the guys on the team will be there.”

“That I don't doubt a bit. Just be sure to tell them dress blues, and no tricks.”

“I'll tell them sir, I just don't know if they'll listen.”

“Well, they know what I'll do to them. They don't want to know what a certain vixen will do. For that matter, neither do I.”

“A vixen, sir? That's a surprise.”

“It surprised me, too, Jeff. Here's her picture.”

When Jeff sees Kel's picture, he whistles softly. “Wow. If I'd seen her when I was looking, I'd sure have stopped.”

“Thanks, Jeff. She's something special.”

Just then, a petty officer comes up and asks, “Captain Ujinkhan? Your plane is ready, sir. If you will follow me, please.”

Gathering up their bags, Kass and Chief Salters follow the petty officer out to the flight line, where their Lear executive jet is waiting.

The petty officer loads their bags into the hold, and Kass leads the way aboard the plane. The petty officer joins them for a few minutes while he explains the safety procedures and shows them the head and the refreshments, then he leaves and the co-pilot, a Lieutenant j.g., secures the door.

“If you and the Chief will please secure your seatbelts, sir, we will be departing immediately. We have been informed that you will be discussing classified materials during the flight, so the pilot and I will remain in the cockpit. If you need anything in flight, the intercom is here. Power for your laptops is here. Is there anything else, sir?”

“No, Lieutenant, I believe you have covered everything. Thank you. Let's get underway, shall we?”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

After the co-pilot has secured the cockpit door, Jeff turns to Kass. “Pretty spiffy transport, sir. Where are we going? I wasn't informed.”

“First, Jeff, let's drop the sir when we're alone. Call me Kass, just like you always have. You know when it's appropriate. This bird is a surprise to me, too. I wasn't expecting a C-130, but I had no idea what we'd be traveling in. I was actually expecting to go commercial, in fact. Anyway, after a refueling stop at Pearl, we're headed for Johnston Island. Once we're finished there, we'll be heading for another island for some rough water testing.”

“And what are we testing?”

“You weren't informed at all, were you?” Kass asks.

“Just a minimal briefing, sir, so I'd bring the right uniforms.”

“Okay. We are going to certify and accept a new platform that is going to supplement the RIB's and inflatables we're using now for covert insertions. It's a development of a hovercraft that also allows for submerged operation, and it looks very interesting.”

“That does sound interesting. What do you have I can read?”

Handing over a large 3-ring binder, Kass says, “Here you go, Jeff. This is a hardcopy of the overview and specs. I've got detailed info and engineering specs, along with drawings, on the laptop that I'm going to be reviewing between here and Pearl. Pipe up when you're ready for more and I'll transfer the files.”

“Will do, sir.”

Silence descends as they immerse themselves in study.

“Kass? Ready for a break?” Jeff asks an hour or so later.

“Sure thing. Coffee?”

“I'll get it,” Jeff replies.

Settling back with their coffee, the two furs regard each other briefly.

“A very interesting vessel, Kass,” Jeff says. “If it works out as well as it's presented, it's really going to change covert ops.”

“That's for sure. I can think of several times when I'd of traded any one of several parts of my anatomy for one.”

“So can I, sir. I look at the specs and I find it hard to believe. One hundred fifty knots on six inch chop? And seventy-five or more in a six-foot sea? There's nothing afloat that could catch it!”

“That's for sure. And just so you know, the current official world speed record for a hovercraft, over any surface, is 87 miles per hour. So they've made some really impressive improvements there, and I've been told that they're being conservative on those estimates so they can actually hit them. The theoretical top end is over 200 knots. Five to seven knots submerged is pretty impressive, too, given how 'dirty' the bottom of the hull is. The semi-rigid skirt helps, but, even though it's partially retractable, there's still a lot of drag down there. Plus it gets noisy in a hurry if you increase the speed. Not good on a covert op. They can increase the speed but it's at the expense of range and I

think they've struck a pretty good balance. You can increase the range somewhat, and lower the noise level, by lowering your speed, too. Plus there's darned few mines that it'd have to worry about. With the carbon fiber hull there's not enough metal there to trip a magnetic mine, and it'll skim right over the top of the rest of them.”

“Yes, sir. But, no metal? What about the electric motors? The only real downside I see is that battery pack that needs to be dropped. That's expensive and possibly might expose the mission.”

“True. It isn't always necessary, it really depends on the mission parameters. The on-board battery pack is adequate for short range approaches, up to about five miles or so. The drop pack is intended primarily for highly covert ops where a long range submerged approach and departure are required, say from international waters. A personnel extraction would be a good example of that. There are some proposed mods in the engineering specs for a battery pack that will self-destruct over a couple of days once it's been dropped. The drop will expose some specially treated areas that will be attacked by seawater and the entire battery hull will dissolve in fairly rapid order, something like five or six hours, max. The batteries themselves will also break down, and that is what takes a couple of days. If they can work out the bugs, I like it. The biggest problem with the batteries is environmental and they think they have a handle on that.”

“As for the electric motors,” Kass continues, “they're using a new motor developed in Japan, that makes any other motor look like an energy hog. It uses permanent magnets arranged in some special way so that they provide the majority of the power and the electricity is more to maintain the revs than anything else. They haven't caught on much, because the big boys in that field are fighting tooth and nail to prevent it. The inventor has patents all over the place, and they can't touch him. Besides which, he has his own factory. They use a plastic housing, rather than steel, so they are a lot lighter, and that's where the bonus is when it comes to mines. They get away with the plastic casing because they generate a lot less heat, and they use so much less electricity that your range is increased eight or ten times for the same amount of power.”

“Impressive. I hadn't heard about those, but under the circumstances I'm not surprised. Why wet-cabin, though?”

“I thought about that myself, Jeff. What it comes down to is sealing a few extra components against the sea, which should really be done anyway, versus having a sealed cabin. Not having to battle the complexity and buoyancy of a sealed cabin is a major plus, and not having to build in an air system simplifies the construction and maintenance, a lot. Not sealing the cabin is a big help there, too. They've designed the seats so that the seat back is also your dive pack, with a quick disconnect setup. It'll hold anything up to a large double or triple tank set, or the tanks can be changed out for rebreathers if that's a better fit for the mission. Overall, I think they've made good choices.”

With that, they return to their studies. After a meal break at Pearl while the plane

is being serviced, they re-board for the remainder of their flight.

Chapter 22 Trouble in Seattle

Kass looks around as he exits the Lear at Johnston Island. The atoll looks much as he remembers, and he descends the steps to the tarmac, with Chief Salters right behind him.

The waiting lieutenant, an otter, snaps a salute as he approaches, and Kass returns the salute, sharply.

“Welcome to Johnston Island, sir,” the otter says.

“Thank you, lieutenant, it's good to be here. This is Chief Salters, my chief of staff.”

“Good to meet you, Chief. Captain Ujinkhan, if you and the Chief will follow me, please, we can start in-processing and get your quarters assigned.”

“Very good, lieutenant,” Kass responds, as they follow him.

###

“Good morning, Kel,” Karl says as the vixen enters his home. “How are you today?”

“Depressed, Karl,” she replies in a low voice.

“Because Kass is gone?” he asks.

“Why else?” she responds, her tone dejected and her posture sagging.

Coming to a quick decision, Karl ushers her over to the table and sits her down. “Okay, Kel, no training today for you,” he states as he sits down with her. “We are going to talk this out.”

Looking up at him, Kel asks, “Why?”

“Because you are in no condition to train, and won't be until you pull out of this. And that's one of the jobs I have as your coach. Now, talk to me. Tell me what's going on in your head.”

“Oh, Karl, I just miss him so much,” she says forlornly.

“Of course you do. But he's only been gone for a day. He's been gone longer than that before and you didn't behave like this.”

Looking at her coach, Kel says, “You're right. But this time I know he's going to be

gone for a long time.”

“So, get lonely for him when it is a long time. Don't get yourself in a sweat because he's going to be gone. That's in the future, it hasn't happened yet. When he has been gone for a long time, then miss him like this. But by then, he'll be a lot closer to coming back, so you should be happier, not all sad and depressed.”

She tilts her head as she looks at her coach, amazed. “Karl, you use some of the most twisted logic I have ever encountered. How do you do that?”

“Practice, little femme, practice,” he replies with a grin.

Kel shakes her head, chuckling despite herself at his antics.

“Besides, isn't he a shaman?”

Kel's head snaps up, “How did you know?”

“I could feel his energy when I was around him. It was fairly obvious. I was raised in a shamanic culture, Kel. You know that, we've talked about it. In fact, my people invented the word shaman.”

“They did?”

“Yes, they did. Kass is from Tibet, I believe, or his family is. If that's the case, and he has training from a Tibetan shaman, he's probably going to show up here one of these days and surprise you.”

“What? How?”

“Those furs have developed something they call 'spirit walk' that will allow him to be here in spirit, and, if he's advanced enough, in body. Which I do believe he is capable of doing. I don't know how they do it, nor does any fur I know. But it has been observed on a few occasions.”

“That sneaky snow leopard, I'm gonna, gonna...”

“Calm down, little miss. I'm not a shaman myself, but I do know that doing that takes an enormous amount of energy and discipline, and it is not something he's going to do casually. It's also fairly dangerous for him, if my thinking is correct. So if you do ask him about it, don't expect him to do it without a good reason. And that's only if he can. It's a fairly rare ability.”

“Okay, Karl, if you say so.”

“I do.”

“Okay. Now that you have pulled me out of my little pit of despair, what are we doing next?”

“Keep talking. I said we wouldn't be doing any training today. This is a day for you to talk and think.”

“Do you think Kass will teach me how to do this 'spirit walk'?”

“He might. But if he does, it's going to be years from now, Kel. It is a very advanced technique and you and I both are far short of that skill level.”

“I'll ask him about it, though.”

“Go ahead. If you get an answer out of him at all, the best you're going to get will be 'maybe'.”

Kel looks pensive for a moment, then grins wryly. “You're right there, Coach. Whether I ask if he's coming here or if he'll teach me, that will be the answer I get, I'm sure.”

###

“Good morning, Chief.”

“Good morning, sir. What do we have on tap for today?”

Kass pauses, looking at the sea otter. “We have a day of classroom familiarization, Chief. As you well know. Tomorrow, we'll be examining the craft itself, and we'll spend the rest of the week getting some hands-on in the shop. Right now, it's time for breakfast. Let's hit the mess.”

“You got it, sir. I just wanted to verify that the schedule hasn't changed.”

“It's a bit early for that. Next week, I don't know.”

“No one does, sir, in this fur's navy.”

Kass chuckles as they enter the mess. After a quick glance around, they join the line and get their breakfast.

That evening, as they relax at the officer's club after dinner, they discuss what they've learned about the new craft.

“That's an impressive little boat, sir.”

“You got that right, Chief,” Kass replies. “It is a very impressive craft. It could be larger, and I imagine the suggestion has been made, but for what they've designed it for, I believe that the current design is pretty near optimum.”

He continues, “Designing it for a three fur team makes it small and unobtrusive, and the fourth seat makes it ideal for extractions while also providing some cargo capability. It's big enough to do the job when you only need a minimal team. For larger jobs, we've got the RIB's and other craft.”

“Yes, sir, and for intermediate jobs, several of these little beauties will still do the job and add a lot of flexibility, too. Do you think they can build a larger craft, say squad size?”

“Undoubtedly, and for some operations that would be really nice. Mainly, I think, situations where the sheer speed will be useful. When they get that big as a submersible, stealth is a good bit more difficult. Still, it's a good design, and I think we really need to wring it out good.”

“I'm with you on that, sir. And between us, I believe we will.”

Checking the time, Kass excuses himself. “I need to call home, Chief, so I'm going to call it a night. See you in the morning.”

“See you in the morning, sir,” the sea otter says as Kass departs.

###

Jo-Ann knocks on Lt. Lutrans door frame, “You wanted to see me, Lieutenant?”

Looking up, the river otter tells her, “Come on in and sit down, Jo-Ann. I've got something for you.”

“Yes, sir. What do you have?” she asks, sitting down.

“A new task force is being put together. There have been two more murders since the initial one in Bellevue, and we have a pattern that says 'serial killer' pretty clearly. Since the profile includes drugging the victims, we're included and I've selected you. Detective Kerry is very pleased with your progress and it's about time you did some independent work.”

“Oof. That's a lot to take all at once, Lieutenant. Compliments and an assignment to a task force? All I can say is thanks. I think.”

“You're welcome. The initial meeting will be next Monday, so you have most of a week to get used to the idea. Your old partner will be joining you in two or three weeks, so don't spoil the surprise for him, please. He's just got a few more things to complete and

then we'll put you two back together. The two of you complement each other very well and we want to keep that team intact. Ange knows and will help you get all your loose ends tied up. Keep developing your street contacts, you can never have too many of those."

"Will do, Lieutenant. And thanks," Jo-Ann says as she stands up to leave. "I won't say a thing to Jack, either. Can I watch when you tell him?"

"I don't know. I'll keep that in mind, but I don't think so. Now get out of here and get back to work!" he finishes with a snarl and a poorly hidden grin.

"Aye, aye, sir!" Jo-Ann says as she snaps to attention and renders him a perfect military salute, a twinkle in her eye.

"Grrrrr!" is his response as she leaves his office.

When she sits down at her desk, Ange Kerry comes over with a grin on her face. Bending down, she whispers, "Way to go, girl! I haven't heard him snarl like that in ages! You must have really pleased him, somehow."

Jo-Ann eyes her friend and co-worker. "What do you mean?" she asks in a quiet voice.

Ange sits down and takes her paw. "Honey, when he growls like that it just means that things are going exactly like he wants them to, and he wants to hide it. The nastier the snarl, the happier he is, and he really growled at you. So you did good."

Sitting up and raising her voice to a more normal conversation level, Ange continues, "I'm betting he told you about your new assignment, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did."

"Pleased?"

"I'm looking forward to it, anyway," Jo-Ann grins. "It will be a change of pace."

"You can be sure of that. Any idea who you'll be working with?"

"Only one name at this point, and that won't be for two or three weeks. Otherwise, not a clue."

"I don't know much more, girlfriend," Ange replies. "I know Homicide will be in charge, but beyond that I haven't heard a thing. They're really playing this one close to the vest. I don't think they're planning any announcements at all."

Jo-Ann relaxes a bit. "That's good. I don't like being in the spotlight if I can avoid it. I'm much more effective in the shadows."

“I’m with ya, there. Then again, you are a bit too well known for undercover work. Be glad of that. Furs in that group can have a lot of problems once they come back out.”

“I know. I’ve dealt with a number of them over the years as a beat officer. I don’t think I could deal with that very well.”

“Hey, let’s deal with getting your desk cleared off, huh? You don’t want to leave me to clean it up all by myself, do you?”

Eying the otter, Jo-Ann replies slowly, “I don’t know ... think it might do you any good?”

Then, with matching giggles, they chorus, “NAH!”

###

Esmerelda Harcourt-Smyth awakens slowly. Looking around, still half-asleep, she wonders briefly where she is, before memory returns. *I’m still in this stinking jail cell. HOW DARE THEY IMPRISON ME! I was doing it for her own good! And that ingrate of a daughter, no, wait, **she’s no daughter of mine!** No daughter of mine would have run off with a low-life saloon keeper, and one not even of her own species, at that. That old witch, my husband’s so-called mother, must have kept my daughter and returned a changeling! That’s it! She **KILLED** my daughter and gave me a lousy golem in exchange. The old witch is dead, now, there’s no way I can challenge her to get my real daughter back. **DAMN YOU! DAMN YOU TO HELL! DAMN YOU ALL TO HELL!***

She bolts upright in bed with a screech of outrage. Then, looking around in the late night darkness, she slowly lowers herself back down to the mattress.

I have got to get out of here. But how? I’m not strong enough or fast enough to escape by myself. I will have to have help ... perhaps some of the Brethren will help me ... No, my bastard son-in-law has made that impossible, with his frivolous lawsuits, frittering away the money that the Brethren need to continue their Godly work. I’ll talk with Gerald tomorrow, he can get in touch with furs who will help me. I know he will!

With these thoughts, she calms slowly and eventually falls back to sleep, a less than pleasant smile on her muzzle. The guard furs, watching her on an infrared camera, note the smile in their logbook.

###

Kass carefully works himself out from under the maintenance frame holding the ‘SCAT’. The team came up with this nickname, it stands for “SEALs’ Covert Alternative Transport”. The inherent pun makes the name even more appropriate, in his opinion.

“What do you think, sir?” Jeff asks.

“Well, Chief, the concept is good, but I think we can improve the implementation. The battery pack drop mechanism has too many failure points for me to be happy with it. Let's go have another look at the prints and see what we can come up with.”

“Aye, aye, sir.”

“Some of our maintenance furs feel the same way, Captain,” comes from the gray fox, Philip Sellers, who is accompanying them. He is a representative from the manufacturer, and is also one of the designers.

“I've been mostly involved in the software development, so I'm not as familiar with the mechanical aspects. I'll send an email to Mike when we're back at the office, and get his input, too. He'll have some ideas, I'm sure.”

Kass brushes himself off, and leads the way back to the office they're using. When they're seated, he continues.

“I think the cross-connected mechanical linkage is redundant and too likely to bind up, especially in a salt-water environment. I'd like to see four small cross-bolt mount-points with simple solenoid mechanisms. A mechanical backup wouldn't hurt, but that could be very simple, just levers attached to the cross-bolts and under small individual covers inside the vehicle cabin. They could be used to manually operate the mechanism, using an extension lever if necessary, and would also function as indicators when checking correct operation, particularly if the cover is transparent. Two birds with one stone.”

“That would work, sir,” Jeff interjects, “and if the solenoids were double-acting, then both attaching and detaching would be a lot simpler. Add a service point to connect a remote control and the service furs would appreciate it.”

“Very good, Chief. I like it. Keeping the maintenance furs happy should be a primary consideration for every designer. I wish more of them thought that way. We already have a four-point mount system, so what we need is the current mechanism removed and the solenoids installed. Right?”

“Yes, sir. I think the furs we have here can do that today. I'll go talk with them and see. A couple of them are really very knowledgeable, and Machinist's Mate Conway is one of the best I've ever seen.”

“See to it, Chief. Mr. Sellers and I will get a message off to his partners and the design team.”

###

Esmerelda sits in the interview room the next morning, waiting for her lawyer.

“Gerald,” she says as he enters, “I have to talk to you.”

“At least let me get sat down, Esmerelda,” he says with a frown as the officer closes the door to the room.

Once he is satisfied that the room is sealed, he looks at the plump skunkette. “Now, what is it you need to see me about? I have work at the office that I have to get finished, you know.”

“Gerald, can you get in touch with some furs to get me out of here? I know the Brethren can't do it, thanks to that worthless, so-called son-in-law of mine and his stupid lawsuits, but surely you know other furs.”

“Esmerelda, there is no way to get you out of here until after the trial, and then only if we win. Which, quite frankly, is extremely unlikely.”

“Gerald, I don't give a damn about the trial. I have to get out of here NOW!”

“Now, now. Calm down, Esmerelda. I just told you, it can't be done. I don't know any fur who is willing to help you under any circumstances. And you know that you have no discretionary funds available. Your finances have been frozen and your stock has been locked into the proxy that your daughter holds.”

“I don't have a daughter!” she screams in rage. “That creature, the one that is masquerading as my daughter, is a golem! Created by my husband's mother to taunt me!”

“Calm down, calm down. Do you want the officers back in here? You know they'll put you in restraints again.”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!” she screams in wordless frustration.

When the door opens, the weasel tells the officer, “I'll handle it. I'll get her calmed down again, if I can. If I can't, I'll call for help. In the meantime, just leave us, please.”

“If you say so, counselor,” the burly rottweiler replies, closing the door again as he shakes his head.

“Now, Esmerelda, you have to listen to me,” he says. “There is no way you can get out of here. You will have to wait until the trial. In the meantime, you need to pray to God that he will save you, because I can't. The evidence against you is absolutely damning, and I can't dismiss any of it. Short of a miracle from God, you're going to prison and there is nothing any fur can do about it. Do you understand?”

“NO!” she screams, attempting to lift her tail to spray. She lets out another scream of rage when the anti-spray harness restrains her. “NO! I will NOT stay here! I will get

out somehow! You just wait! I'll get you all for this! I am Esmerelda Harcourt-Smyth, and this can NOT be happening!"

She continues to rage, ranting on about how she is above all this and it can't be happening. Seeing that she is in an insensate rage and will not listen to him, the weasel goes to the door and opens it, beckoning to the guard.

"I believe that you are going to have to get some help, and probably an injection, to calm her down and get her back to her cell," he says. "I did my best, but she refuses to listen, refuses to believe that this can be happening to her."

"I understand, counselor. Can you stay with her while I get some help?"

"Yes. At least she can't spray. She isn't really capable of hurting me otherwise. I can wait with her."

"Thank you, Mr. Lawlor. I'll be right back."

Turning back into the room, the lawyer continues to try, unsuccessfully, to calm his client down.

###

Kass turns, and asks, "Ready, Chief?"

Jeff Salters replies, "Aye, aye, sir."

"Then let's give this baby a workout," Kass replies as he engages the engines, taking the SCAT out to sea for their first real run.

Several hours later, sitting in a briefing room, they go over the results of their morning ride.

"This was a real surprise, Phil. We were both very surprised at how well the SCAT handles on chop. We had about nine inches this morning, and we were able to control her with little effort up to about 70 knots, that being our current limit. I think she would have done well up to at least 90 and perhaps 100. I wouldn't want to try higher than that without more testing and time at the controls."

Looking at the telemetry data, Phil doesn't reply for moment. "You're right, Captain. These numbers are very good, better than we hoped for. With a bit less chop you will be able to run at 150 knots without issues. And even, perhaps, with the 9" chop you had today."

"Good, good. I can see one or two places where I can try some tweaks in the software, but overall I think I'll leave well enough alone for now."

“Thanks, Phil. It's appreciated. So she'll be up on the cradle tomorrow?”

“Probably. There are some changes Mike wants made before you go playing with the attitude fans.”

“Good enough,” Kass replies. “Let's get out of here.”

###

Jo-Ann enters the conference room on Monday morning. Looking around, she sees several furs. One of them, a bulky and muscular German Shepherd, beckons to her.

“Detective Procyon?” he asks.

“Yes, that's me,” she replies.

“I'm Joseph Fenrir, call me Joe. I'm in charge of this circus, at least for now. I'm a homicide lieutenant with Bellevue. You're with Seattle, aren't you?”

“Yes, I am. Narcotics. Up until fairly recently, I was a patrol officer.”

“Well, we can certainly use furs with street smarts. Congratulations on your promotion. I'm not so sure that congratulations are due for being here. You have a seat reserved over there at the table, and the case histories we have so far. We have several more furs due to arrive in the next few minutes, then we'll get started. We also have several more furs scheduled to join us over the next couple of weeks.”

“I know. One of them is my partner. He was promoted to sergeant and transferred to Narcotics with me. He just has a couple more training items to complete and then he'll be here. Two weeks at the most.”

“And who is that?”

“Jack Canus. We've been partners for quite a few years.”

“That's good. A lot of times, the furs we get for a task force like this are loners. Teams work better, and they know how to work with other furs, too. It all helps.”

“We'll do the best we can, sir.”

“That's all we can ask, detective. Thanks. Let me introduce you.”

Taking her around, he introduces her to the furs that are present.

A few minutes later, he chivvies every fur into their seats, and takes his place at the

head of the table.

“Okay, everyone. I’m Joseph Fenrir, I believe I’ve introduced myself to all of you. Remember, I answer better if you call me Joe.” He smiles tightly at the brief flurry of smiles his statement causes.

“Now, so far we’ve been lucky. The press hasn’t caught on about our perp, but don’t count on that continuing. There will be some idiot somewhere, in one of our departments, that will get a thrill about telling some reporter that there’s a new task force been formed. We’ll get swarmed about thirty seconds later. Unless you receive specific orders otherwise, we’re going to ask you to restrain yourselves to “No comment” when talking to the media. We don’t want rumors flying, the newsies can make their own rumors well enough without us adding to the flames. Understood?”

A chorus of agreement makes its way around the table.

“Now, you each have a folder in front of you with all the information we have at the moment. When you read it, you will see that we have three victims we’re pretty certain are all from the same perp. Furs, we have a serial killer here, and he’s pretty damned nasty. I can guarantee that the media is going to come up with a sobriquet for him that will be memorable. I am afraid that this one is going to be up there with the Hillside Strangler and Jack the Ripper. So be prepared, this is going to get ugly before we catch him.”

“Now, I want each of you to read your packet. You all have the same information at this point, and at the end is a list of possibilities for you to pursue, according to your specialty. After lunch, we’ll start with the brainstorming. Let’s get to it.”

With that, silence descends except for the rustle of paper as pages are turned.

###

“Okay, furs. Listen up and let’s get started on this. Let’s start with the common elements. What do the victims have in common?”

Bill Carson, a doberman from the Seattle homicide unit, starts. “They are all young adults, from 19 to 22 years old.”

“They were all attractive, too,” Carla Davis adds. She is a cougar with the Washington State Police.

Jo-Ann hesitates a moment, then puts in, “I think they were all taken between about 10pm and midnight, from the streets.”

“What makes you say that, Jo-Ann?” Wendy Smithson asks. An attractive mink with the FBI, she’s been silent so far.

“Just a feeling, I guess. Reading between the lines, when they were last seen. I think if we check, we'll also discover that none of those streets are all that well lit.” She knows this for certain, her clairvoyance has shown her all three abductions, but the lighting was poor enough that she couldn't make out any details about the perpetrator. She also knows to present these items in a more hesitant way, so that they will be believable.

“Some good points, there, Jo-Ann,” Joe says as he writes them down on the whiteboard he's using to list items.

William Jackson, the FBI profiler working with them, adds, “The autopsies seem to indicate that he is using some sort of drug to incapacitate them when they're taken. The lab isn't positive yet, but it seems to be rohypnol or one of its derivatives. They expect the results on that within the next day or two.”

Nodding at the red wolf, Joe adds that to the list. “So he's using drugs to control them when he takes them. Is he keeping them on drugs?”

“I don't think so,” William replies. “The traces in the bodies are not that strong, and there don't seem to be any other drugs.”

“So he's using the drugs to keep them quiet until he gets them away,” Jim Harris interjects. He is a pine marten from Bellevue homicide. “I'll bet that wherever he takes them is either isolated or well sound-proofed, or both, so that screams can't be heard. With what he's doing to them, I'll guarantee that they were screaming.”

“There's no doubt of that at all, Jim,” Joe replies. “One of the femmes had badly swollen vocal chords, and the M.E. says that it came from screaming and not trauma.”

“So he's a control freak and likes to inflict pain and hear his victims scream,” Carla puts in. “Sounds like a sadist to me.”

“More like BDSM, Carla,” William answers. “There are plenty of marks that tell me bondage, not just restraint, along with the purely physical damage he's inflicting. I had another case some years back with a similar background. The perp had a dungeon and torture chamber in his basement. The soundproofing was better than most sound studios. It was mostly luck that we ever caught him. He was careful, but he finally made a mistake and we caught him. That room still gives me nightmares.”

“I've learned a bit about BDSM, over the years,” an otter puts in. Sam Waters is a lieutenant with the State Police. “Most practitioners are very careful, and it is completely consensual. In fact, the fur being bound, usually called either the 'bottom' or the 'sub', is actually the one in charge. I don't really understand the difference between the two terms, but I've been assured that they are quite different.”

“Anyway, the 'sub' has a safe word that will stop everything instantly if things go too far. While bruises are really common, and cuts happen, broken bones and worse are

very rare. These furs are doing this for mutual enjoyment, although I'll be damned if I can see pain as enjoyable.”

Jo-Ann adds her thoughts, “Well, I've done some study of BDSM at the Sex Positive Community Center, asking questions. What I've learned is that the pain is part of releasing control. The exchange of control is what excites them, a lot of the time. Giving someone else control of your body and sometimes your mind can be very exciting. Particularly for furs who have to be in control of themselves in their everyday lives. It is a way for them to let go and relax, totally. No decisions to make, just do what you're told. Normally, all of this is sexual in nature, but there are exceptions.”

I don't think I'll tell them that a lot of that 'study' was first hand experience. Or how addictive it can be with the right partner. Mmmm ... Get your mind back on business, girl! Then again, the wrong partner can make it literal hell, as these victims show.

###

Kass shakes his head. “We need to be able to swivel those fans any direction at any time, and not worry about stops! Is there **any** way we can put in some sort of swivel fitting for the power and controls? Some sort of wiper-type mechanism, maybe?”

“I don't know, Captain,” Phil replies. “That isn't my area of expertise. I'll get on the phone right away with Mike and a couple of the electrical engineers and see what they say. I agree with you, though, having limit stops is not going to be acceptable.”

Kass takes a deep breath, obviously calming himself. “Okay, then. I'm upset because that limitation very nearly caused a serious accident today. The only thing preventing that was Chief Salters' skill at the controls. In an actual op, it would have been fatal. Period. This has to be solved. Those attitude fans have to be able to swivel without limit.”

“Understood, sir. Anything else?”

“No. Otherwise, today's exercise went letter perfect. It could hardly have been better.”

“I'll let Mike know that, too. Thank you, Captain. Another officer might have taken something like this much more poorly.”

“You speak as a fur who has had this happen,” Kass said quietly.

“Yes, sir. I have. I have also made it clear, on several levels, that I will not work with that fur again, and made it plain as to why.”

“I understand. Probably better than you realize, Phil. And thank you.”

###

Gwen watches Kel enter the living room at CCN, concerned at the expression on her friend's muzzle.

Reaching a decision, she stands up and takes the vixen by the arm, leading her into the den and sitting her down on the couch there.

Joining her on the couch after closing the door, Gwen looks her straight in the eye.

“Okay, Kel, spill it. You've been moping around here like you're waiting for the headsfur's axe. What's going on in your head that you're acting like this?”

Kel stares at her, a stunned, deer-in-the-headlights look in her eyes.

Gwen just looks back, waiting.

Suddenly, Kel wilts, a look of utter despair writing itself across her features. She looks at Gwen with the expression of a waif who has lost all hope.

“Oh, honey, what's wrong?” Gwen asks, her voice full of compassion, as she takes the vixen in her arms.

Kel holds Gwen close for a moment, then the dam breaks and the sobs start and tears flow as she collapses completely.

“He's gone, he's gone, and he's not coming back,” she wails into Gwen's shoulder. “He's left me and he's never coming back!”

Gwen is stunned. She knows, absolutely and without any doubt, that Kass will never leave Kel. She had been equally sure that Kel knew this. But this breakdown obviously shows otherwise.

Murmuring platitudes and comforting the vixen with a small portion of her mind, Gwen gathers herself and attempts a use of Syntheria that she's been investigating.

“Kass! Kel needs you, now! Can you get here?” she calls.

She feels Kass respond, and send a feeling of reassurance. Then she feels him leave the mundane world in a way she's never felt before.

Returning her full attention to the vixen in her arms, she says, “Kel, Kass will never, ever leave you. You are separated right now, but that is because of his work. He'll be back, don't you ever doubt it.”

“Gwen, he's gone! Just like my family, he's gone, forever! I'll never get him back!”

she wails, then collapses back on her friend's shoulder, weeping, lost in abject misery.

Gwen, helpless, just holds her and rocks her, comforting the vixen as best she can.

Some fifteen minutes later, she feels the house wards alarm at a strange intrusion, then shut down almost the instant they activated. Before she can react, Kass *materializes* in front of her, in uniform, and pulls Kel from her arms.

Kel shrieks in terror at the horrendously strong grip that tears her from Gwen's arms, and looks up. Then she shrieks even louder and wraps herself around Kass like ivy around a tree. It doesn't look like she'll ever release him.

Gwen stands, slowly, looking at Kass in amazement. As she does, she sees a level of exhaustion on his features that she has never seen before. She realizes he is near physical collapse.

Looking over Kel's shoulder as she clings to him, Kass mouths "Switchel" to Gwen, then turns his attention to his fiancée. Gwen nods and heads for the kitchen. Something tells her to make a big batch.

When she returns to the den, Gwen finds Kass still standing and Kel still wrapped around him, her weeping unabated, although it seems that the tears are now joy and relief. Kass is whispering quietly in the vixen's ear, too low for Gwen to make out any words.

Setting the Switchel down on her desk, Gwen looks at Kass, a question in her expression. Kass gives her an infinitesimal nod towards her chair, indicating she should sit down. Then he returns his attention to his vixen, and he starts attempting to unwrap her so he can move.

Gradually, over a period of several minutes, he manages to unwrap her legs and move over to the couch to sit down, with her in his lap. Freeing one arm, he indicates Gwen should bring him a glass.

When she brings him the glass, Gwen whispers, "How did you get here?"

Kass responds, also whispering, "Later. I also need food, but I'll tell you what in a bit." He takes the glass of Switchel and downs it in a couple of swallows, then holds the glass out for more.

Over the next half hour, he gradually unwinds Kel from her clasp on him, though she refuses to leave his lap. He also finishes nearly three quarts of Switchel.

With Kel collapsed on his lap and against his chest, her arms around his neck, Kass turns to Gwen.

"How did you get here?" she asks, amazement etched in her expression.

“Spirit walk,” he replies. “It’s a very advanced shamanic technique, and this is the first time I’ve used it other than training. It is exhausting, especially across the distance I’ve traveled and at the speed I used. I sprinted the entire way. I need food to replenish my energy, because I have to return tonight, before I’m missed. About a pound of rare steak and a big plate of pasta, whatever you’ve got. Protein and carbohydrates. If you can fix a double batch, with another steak, and another gallon or so of Switchel, I can carry those back with me. I’ll need them when I get there.”

Gwen rises immediately. “I’ll get started right now. It’ll take twenty-thirty minutes for the pasta, and I’ll have the steak ready at the same time. I’ll make two and package up the extra for you. How long can you stay?”

“Maybe two more hours. I won’t be moving as fast going back, and I have to allow for sleep, too. If I can leave sooner, it will help.”

At this, Kel wraps her arms around him even tighter. She whispers something in his ear.

Kass pulls back and looks at her, surprised. Then he hugs her close. Bending his head, he whispers in her ear, “Yes, dear heart, I can take time for that. Not a lot of time, but enough. I don’t know why that request surprised me, I really don’t.”

She relaxes into his embrace and sighs contentedly.

###

Two hours later, fed and supplied, and with a happily sated vixen asleep in her bed, Kass prepares to leave.

“Gwen, when you’re ready, I’ll teach you ‘spirit walk’. It’s going to be quite a while though. And it is not something to be approached lightly. It can kill you if you do it wrong, and I pushed the limits a lot coming here. It’s going to take me a couple of hours to get back, moving at a more reasonable rate. This stuff you’ve fixed for me will really help. Otherwise I’d have to claim mono or something to explain my fatigue. I’m just glad this didn’t happen in the middle of the week. Tell Kel, when she wakes up, that I’ll be back for real in two more months. And you be careful, you’re getting awfully big now with those twins. We don’t want any accidents there, either.”

“I’ll do that, Kass,” Gwen replies, a catch in her throat. “Quite a while means years, I bet.”

“Yes, it does.”

“The twins are fine, they prove it by kicking my ribs regularly. I’ll be glad to have them born.”

“You're going to be a wonderful mom, Gwen. I envy those kits that. I've got to go. See you in May.”

Gwen quietly says, “Bye, Kass,” as he shimmers and disappears.

###

“Well, look at the sleepy head,” Gwen says when Kel stumbles into the kitchen the next morning. “Feel better?”

“Oh, Gwen, you can't imagine how much better I feel,” the vixen replies, a slow smile lighting her face.

“I bet I can. Do you believe now that he's not leaving you?”

“Yes, I do. How did you call him? And **how** did he get here?”

“Kel, honey, I called him using Syntheria. An advanced technique, I don't know if you'll get that far. You're much too focused on your healing, I think. As for Kass, he used 'spirit walk' to get here.”

“Oh. Karl's told me a little about that. He says it's really advanced shamanism, and it can be dangerous.”

Gwen nods in agreement. “Yes, it is dangerous. Kass was very, very near collapse when he got here, sweetie. He put himself at risk because you needed him that badly last night.”

“He did? He was?” Kel asks in amazement.

“Yes, he did and he was. I would have been surprised if you had noticed, what with the emotional state you were in. If he hadn't sat down when he did, he would have collapsed very soon afterwards from trying to hold you up. I have never seen a fur so tired.”

“You were so busy loving him that I know you didn't notice how he ate or how much. He also put down over a gallon of Switchel while he was here, and took another gallon, and another huge meal, back with him.”

“Wha...”

“Kel, I told you. He nearly killed himself getting here. It was no more than fifteen minutes from when I called him to when he arrived. He told me it would take two hours or more to go back, moving at a more normal pace. He had sprinted the entire distance to get here for you.”

Kel falls back in her chair, stunned. “He did that for me?” she asks in wonderment.

“He loves you very, very much, Kel. He will never leave you. Do you finally understand that, now?”

“Yes, Gwen, I do,” she answers, the belief finally clear in her voice, and mind.

###

“Ready, Chief?”

“Yes, sir! Let's take this baby down.”

“Aye, aye, Chief. Let's get out to where we have some depth, and we'll see what this baby can do below the surface. We can pretend we're submariners.”

“The dolphin lads will just love that comment, sir.”

“They'll survive. Let's get moving. Besides, if they do hear it, I know who to come after.”

###

“Final gear check, Jeff,” Kass says as the SCAT bobs gently at rest on the chop, all of her fans silent and her deck awash.

“Aye, aye, Kass. Let's take this slow and easy, this is the first time we're going submerged.”

“I'm with you there. Slow and easy. We can open her up more later.”

“Gear check complete, Kass.”

“Gear check complete, Jeff. Let's get going.”

###

Karl looks at Kel as she sits down. The change in her demeanor is astounding. On Friday, she was dragging, her spirits so low that he was seriously worried about her and what little training they did accomplish was minuscule. Today, she's chipper and very up-beat.

“Well! What happened that you're in such a good mood?” he asks.

“Oh, Karl, it was wonderful.”

“What happened?”

“You remember when we talked about spirit walk?”

“Yes ...”

“Well, Kass did that Saturday night. He came home to see me.”

“What brought that on?”

Kel blushes. “I was feeling really blue, and Gwen started asking me why. I just broke down and fell to pieces, and she called Kass. He showed up a little later, just for me. And he showed me that he would never leave me. That's what had me so broken up, I was sure I'd lost him, that he wouldn't be coming back.”

“Ah. So he came home for you. What did you learn?”

“Is this a lesson, Karl?” she asks.

“Yes, it is. It's something you need to learn, little miss, something you very much need to learn. You need to learn it in your heart and stomach, not just in your head.”

“Oh. Well, I learned that Kass loves me more than I could believe. He almost killed himself getting here, he was so exhausted when he got here that he could barely stand. I didn't see that, but Gwen did.”

“And he did stay with you for a while?”

“Only a couple hours, but it was enough.”

“And have you learned the lesson?”

“Yes, Karl. I have. Kass proved his love for me, in a way I can't deny. I'm not sure I would have believed anything less.”

“Just don't do that to him again, Kel, there is no need anymore, nor should there ever be again. I mean it, Kel. **Never** again.”

###

Back on the island, Kass and Jeff sit down with Phil Sellers.

“A good start, Phil. She's responsive to the controls while she's submerged, and easy to control. Any fur that qualifies on the surface should have no problems with her under water. Using the air cushion fans for depth control is a nice piece of out-of-the-box

thinking.”

“Yes,” Jeff agrees. “And I’m pleasantly surprised at how quietly we were able to submerge. I expected a lot more fuss.”

“A light paw on the controls, when you first start down makes a lot of difference, Chief,” the gray fox replies. “If your paw gets heavy, you can throw water thirty feet or more into the air. Not exactly stealthy, then.”

“Nope, that wouldn’t be,” the sea otter replies thoughtfully. He perks up. “We can save that for the show-and-tell, and soak the big shots.”

“Now, now, Chief,” Kass interrupts, “I know you enjoy twisting the tails of the brass, but there are times when it isn’t really appropriate, even if it would be fun.”

“Spoilsport,” he says sulkily, although his eyes are twinkling.

“You know, Phil,” he continues, “if we had a burst mode for submerging, we could make it look like we got sunk. It’d have to be done just right, but when it all goes to hell, that could be a useful trick to have around.”

“Excellent idea, Chief,” Kass enthuses. “Let’s investigate that one, shall we, Phil?”

###

“Gwen, can we talk for a bit?” Jo-Ann asks as she enters the den.

“Sure, Jo-Ann. What’s up?”

Jo-Ann settles on the couch, squirming uncomfortably.

Seeing this, Gwen gets up and comes around the desk, joining Jo-Ann on the couch, then asking, “What’s got you wound up like this, sweetie?”

“Oh, Gwen, I just know you’re going to hate me!” Jo-Ann whispers hesitantly.

Taking her paws, Gwen replies, “I doubt that, and that tells me why you’re here, too. Go for it, girl. We’ve both been waiting for you to ask.”

Seeing Jo-Ann’s wide-eyed stare, in response to her comment, Gwen chuckles. “Sweetie, it’s been as obvious as your tail. Rick noticed it several weeks ago, and I agree with him.”

“B-B-But ...” Jo-Ann stammers.

Taking the shaken raccoon in her arms, Gwen soothes her. “It’s okay, sweetheart,

both of us think it's a wonderful idea. So go ahead.”

“Oh, Gwen,” Jo-Ann sobs, “I love you so much, and I was so worried ...”

“Hush, now. There's nothing to worry about, and I am completely in favor of this. Go. Rick will figure it out when he gets home.”

“Thank you, thank you, thank you,” the relieved raccoon replies.

“I'm going!” she says a moment later, in response to the skunkette shoving her out the door.

Gwen turns back to her desk, a smile on her muzzle and a tune on her lips.

It's about time she realized what's been bothering her. She wants kits, and she wants Rick to sire them. And she believes, or did believe, that her desires would make me hate her. For some, perhaps most, femmes, that would probably be true. But in this household she should have known better. Ah, well, she does now. Uuuuhh ... What the? That was a strong premonition ... So she's going to have twins, too? Must be something about the Coona family that causes that. Is she ever in for a surprise!

Gwen settles back to her Syntheria studies with a smile ghosting back and forth on her muzzle.

###

“Okay, Chief,” Kass says as they watch the SCAT being loaded on board the light cruiser, “now we get to see what she does in some rough water evolutions.”

Chief Salters is resting against a railing, watching the crane handlers load the SCAT. “If they don't drop her, sir. You know, I'm really looking forward to this.”

“Me too, Chief, me too.”

###

Jo-Ann settles in her chair for the weekly briefing. The 'Bellevue Butcher' is now front page news in the northwest and is starting to get national news exposure. So Joe is having to spend a lot more time at press briefings and less time on the job, and the rest of the team has had to pick up the slack.

The lack of progress has been frustrating. The perp is spreading his attacks across the entire Seattle metro area, from Tacoma to Bellevue, and he is leaving damnably little evidence behind. Nor does there seem to be any pattern in his attacks, they are evenly scattered across the metroplex. He has been ahead of the task force from the start. It's like

he's taunting them.

There is a growing belief in the task force that the perp is, or at least has been, a LEO, a Law Enforcement Officer. He seems to know what they look for and he doesn't leave any obvious evidence behind. What few clues he does leave don't give any evidence of his identity, or even his species, just the kind of violence he likes to exert on his victims. He rapes every victim, male or female, then douches them with a corrosive solution that thoroughly destroys any DNA evidence, and it must cause enormous pain to the victim, as well, given the tissue damage that has been documented. This is actually one of the most disgusting and despicable of his actions, so much so that several members of the task force have recommended douching him with his own solution. There is a growing call for more action from the public, although most of that is actually coming from the press, in their never-ending search for sensationalism.

Jo-Ann has been particularly frustrated in her own endeavors. He is using a rohypnol derivative that is readily available on the street, so attempting to track him there has been fruitless.

Dammit! I have gotten squat on this jerk, not even my clairvoyance is doing me any good right now. Eleven stinking weeks we've been on this case, and we have accomplished exactly nothing, except to document the crap he pulls.

Gwen keeps telling me to relax, that my stress and anger are what are blocking me. Her kits are so cute! No, get back on the subject, here, Jo-Ann, no wool-gathering.

I just wish I could get even a glimpse of his face. Or a pre-cog of where he's going to strike next. I have gotten a look at his dungeon, and William is right, I am going to have nightmares about that room for years. He's got stuff there that must be straight from the Spanish Inquisition. But I do know that it's a basement, cinderblock walls and a poured concrete floor. Like that's going to be any help. That describes 90% of the basements ever built. On the other paw, when we do find it, there's going to be one hell of a lot of blood evidence there. There's no way to get it out of concrete, or the leather. I do know that it's in Seattle, somewhere north of the university district. That narrows it down, but there's no way I can pass that information on. Every fur on the force would want to know how and where I got the info.

As Jo-Ann is sitting and ruminating over her frustration, she suddenly feels a pre-cog. What? Oh ... That son-of-a-bitch! He's going to be stalking the streets around the Castle Superstore tonight! That arrogant, slimy bastard! He wants himself a little femme who just bought her own torture device. Well, I'm going to be there, too. Let's just see if I can't catch the bastard in the act!

That night, Jo-Ann starts her patrols around the Castle Superstore at 9pm. She has spent considerable effort convincing Jack to stay at home with his family tonight. He has been spending way too much time, in her opinion, on this case. He needs to spend time with his family. She can handle this patrol on her own.

On her rounds, she is surprised to recognize a dark sedan, William Jackson's personal car, on one particularly dark street. She wonders what he's doing there, he certainly doesn't seem like the type to shop such a store. She has learned that he is a bachelor, too. "Oh, well," she mutters as she continues her rounds, "maybe he has a kinky girlfriend."

Just after midnight, Jo-Ann rounds a corner, just in time to see William's car screech out of his parking place and speed off past her into the night. He doesn't turn his lights on until he's several blocks away and has slowed down to pull to the side again, where he seems to park for a moment.

Then he pulls out again at a more normal speed, with his lights on, and turns north, like he is heading home.

Jo-Ann is curious, and she heads into the store to question the employees. An hour later she exits the store at a run, cursing as she runs. William had not been in the store, not one employee remembered seeing a red wolf.

As she reaches her car, panting, she stops. Dammit again! I don't have any evidence at all, there's no way I can get a search warrant, and some poor fur is dying right now or will be very soon. We know he doesn't keep them alive very long. SHIT!!! Hold on there, girl, slow down, what can you do? Nothing, that's what you can do. DAMMIT! You have a strong, supportable suspicion, but no evidence. You know that bastard lives in the area you've determined. When they find a body in the next couple of days, just like the last twelve, you're going to feel like you murdered the poor soul yourself, but you didn't, there was, and is, nothing you can do. So, what can I do? I can go to Joe with my suspicions, and see if we can find some real evidence. We've got to keep William from suspecting anything. Okay. Take a deep breath now, and let it out. Calm. Center. Let the rage go. Calm ... Calm ... Center ...

The next morning, bright and early, Jo-Ann enters Joe Fenrir's office and closes the door behind her.

Joe looks up, surprised. "What's up, Jo-Ann?" he asks, concerned about the thunderclouds in her expression.

"Joe, I have something that we need to keep strictly between the two of us. No one else on the task force can know. Capiche?"

"Okay, Jo-Ann, if that's the way you want it. What's up? You look like you're ready to tear some fur limb from limb."

"I am. I really am. I think I have our perp, Joe. And if I'm right, we're all going to be looking like fools."

Joe perks up instantly. “You do? Give!”

Jo-Ann growls for a moment, then grits out, “William Jackson, our ever-loving FBI profiler.”

Joe is shocked almost out of his socks, and rocks back in his chair. After a moment, the surprise clears from his face and a thoughtful expression takes its place.

“You’re sure?” he asks. “Why?”

“I had a hunch yesterday, and I spent the evening patrolling around the Castle Superstore. I spotted his car a block over, on a dark side street. It was there when I arrived at twenty-one hundred, and didn’t leave until just after midnight. I happened to see him leave. He took off like a scalded kaht with his lights off. Then, about four blocks later, he abruptly slowed down, pulled to the side and slid into another, more visible, parking space, pulled his lights on after a minute or so sitting there, then he drove off normally. Like he didn’t want any fur to connect him with where he was parked before. Plus, when I checked with the employees, no fur remembered seeing him inside, and red wolves aren’t that common, so he would have been remembered, I think. If we get another body in the next day or two, and the victim was last seen at the Castle, then we’ve got a good case to start on, don’t you think?”

“Yes, I think we do, Jo-Ann,” Joe answers slowly. “Damn, I hate to think that one of our own could do this.”

“So do I, Joe, so do I,” Jo-Ann says regretfully. “But if it is, then we are even more honor-bound to apprehend him. Somehow, though, my instincts tell me I’m right. I just want to get him before he kills again.”

“Well, if he follows his normal pattern, we’ll have a body in the next forty-eight hours, so let’s wait and see, shall we?”

Jo-Ann shakes her head regretfully. “That’s all we can do, isn’t it?”

###

“Jeff, where did you come up with this idea?” Kass asks.

“I was just thinking about how to use her in a stealthy approach to the beach, sir. And I thought, why not? We’ve got the right wave conditions here, so I’m trying it.”

“It’s working pretty good, for a brainstorm like that. How hard is she to control?”

“I have to concentrate, sir, but it’s not that difficult. With a bit of practice, it wouldn’t be hard to maintain at all.”

“This one will go into the training manuals as the Salters Maneuver, Chief. You've earned it.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“It's a damned good idea, keeping her in the trough between the waves and riding the surf onto the beach. Doing it with her hull parallel to the wave and moving sideways is something no other craft could do, and it really lowers her profile when she can stay low like this. Well done, Chief!”

###

Phil shakes paws with Kass and Jeff as they prepare for one of the last tests of the SCAT to be performed.

“This is a pretty simple evolution, sir, we're just verifying that the battery pack drop mechanism has the bugs worked out. We have six dummy packs that you'll drop, plus two live battery packs to be dropped after you wring them out a bit. We have specified drop zones for each pack, and we'll be monitoring the disintegration process to be sure that works correctly, too.”

“We can handle that, can't we, Chief?” Kass asks.

“No problem, sir,” Jeff answers with a grin.

###

“Well, that's it, then,” Phil says.

“It is,” Kass replies. “We have completed the programmed test series on time and we've had no major problems. That in itself is a surprise.”

“We worked very, very hard to ensure that there would be none, sir. I'm very happy that we succeeded.”

“Thanks, Phil,” Kass replies. “This has been a very good test of an outstanding new vehicle. I want to thank you and Mike and all the employees at your company. They have acquitted themselves outstandingly. I believe the SCAT will be a revolutionary change for the SEALs. And I look forward to leading that change.”

“You're that certain that she'll be accepted?” Phil asks, surprised.

“Absolutely, if I have any say in the matter, and I believe I do.”

Chapter 23

Arrivals and Departures

Kass deplanes from the 757 that has brought him and Jeff Salters from Honolulu to Seattle. After collecting his luggage, he bids Jeff farewell before hailing a taxi and giving the driver the address for CCN.

This is going to be fun. I haven't pulled a real surprise on Kel and the others in a long time, and showing up unannounced will be a treat. I just hope I survive the rush when I open the door. I better remember to brace myself, or Kel will have me on the floor.

By the gods, I'm happy this assignment is finally over! And I know Kel and the rest of them will feel the same way.

When they pull into the driveway, Kass has the driver put his luggage on the sidewalk near the front door, then he pays his fare and a generous tip and sends the taxi away.

Standing still for a moment, he centers and grounds himself, then moves to the front door, unlocks it and steps inside. Then he waits while the furs at the table, eating their supper, look up in surprise.

An instant later, a red-and-cream blur is streaking towards him, shrieking in joy. When the low-flying vixen missile hits him, Kass manages, just barely, to keep his feet while he staggers backward. Though it's unneeded, he wraps one arm around his fiancée as he waves the other at the furs approaching from the dining room. She is wrapped around him with arms and legs, seemingly determined to never let him go, and she is kissing him with a ferocity that he is quite unable to match.

Later, his bags put away and supper finished, sitting in that same living room, he addresses his extended family.

“Yes, I know you wanted to meet me. But with the flight arriving when it did, I felt it was simpler to just get a taxi and come home. If you all had met me, it would have made a real mess of everyone's schedules. Besides, I haven't pulled a surprise on any of you for a while and I wanted to do it this way.”

Kel, sitting tightly against him on the couch, grabs his muzzle and turns him to face her. “And if you ever do that again, I swear I'm gonna kill you! I almost died when I saw you standing there.”

Laughing, Kass gives her a quick peck. “If you died, you revived instantly. I have never seen you move so fast, and I'm not sure how you got around the table. Or did you go over it?”

Kel, a bashful grin gracing her muzzle, answers, “I have no idea. I saw you and the next thing I knew I was wrapped around you.”

Gwen smiles and adds, “I've never seen her move that fast before either, Kass. In fact, I'm not sure I saw her move. I saw you about half a second before she hit you.”

“Well,” Kass answers, “I don't think it was teleportation, because I did see a blur coming at me. It was moving faster than I've ever seen, but I am sure it was a fur.”

He sits back, grinning, just before Kel fists him in the ribs. “That was me and you know it, you grinning feline. Come here!” she says as she grabs him and kisses him yet again.

Later, as Rick leaves for work, he tells Gwen, “I'm glad it's Tuesday, it'll be a reasonably slow night and I can try to recover from this.”

Gwen gives him a kiss, “You will. I don't expect to see him until sometime tomorrow, when Kel lets him out of bed.”

Rick grins at his soul-mate. “That's true. Do you think he'll be able to walk?”

“Maybe ... Do you think you'd be able to?”

“Probably not without a walker. Well, Kass is a survivor, he'll survive this, too. Love ya, sweetie, see you when I get home.”

The next morning, when Kass stumbles into the kitchen, Gwen looks up and grins.

“I wasn't sure she was going to let you out of bed,” she quips.

“Neither was I,” Kass replies wryly. “I think the only reason I escaped is that she fell asleep.”

“Could be, lover. Coffee, tea, or me?”

“Please, Gwen, not right now,” Kass pleads.

“It's okay, Kass, I was just teasing. I think Kel deserves a day or two with you, just for her. Jo-Ann and I will catch up later.”

“So much for being able to walk this week!” Kass snickers, only half in jest.

###

“Jo-Ann, can you come here, please?” Joe Fenrir asks from his office door.

Getting up, she replies, “What's up, Lieutenant?”

Gesturing her into his office, he closes the door behind her.

“Jo-Ann Procyon, this is FBI Senior Field Agent Annette Cooper. Annette, Jo-Ann,” he says, introducing the raccoon and spotted skunk femmes. After they exchange greetings and sit down, he continues.

“Jo-Ann, after your revelation the other day, I contacted Annette, whom I've known for a few years. When I explained your deductions, she wanted to meet you and I set up this meeting. Unfortunately, it seems your deductions are correct, they've located the latest victim and determined that she was at the Castle Superstore that evening before she disappeared.”

“Jo-Ann,” the spotted skunk says, leaning forward, “I'm really glad you had that hunch, and I am

outraged to think that one of ours is doing this. Do you have any other information to share with us? I specifically include hunches, premonitions, visions ... anything you have.”

Jo-Ann sits back for a moment, regarding the skunkette with a wary expression.

“Well, Annette, I'm not sure exactly how I know this, but I am certain, beyond any doubt, that our perp lives somewhere not too far north of the University District, and I have been for nearly a month. Our suspect lives in that area. I had not connected the two before the other night. I have no doubt that if we can find enough cause for a search warrant, we'll find all the evidence we need in his basement.”

Agent Cooper and Lieutenant Fenrir both sit up abruptly.

“Jo-Ann, do you know anything about the suspect's residence?” Joe asks.

“Absolutely nothing. I remember seeing the address on a piece of paperwork that was floating around early on, so I know approximately where it is, but that is all. I've never been in that neighborhood, on or off duty.”

“He is living in one of only four residences in the entire development that has a basement, and it is the only one that has a full basement.” Annette tells her.

“And we've had some rumors from the neighborhood about odd noises sometimes, late at night. Muffled screams, things like that,” Joe continues.

“And I'll bet they were passed off as horror movies,” Jo-Ann finished.

“They were. We've been quietly checking up on him, and there are enough inconsistencies that we're willing to accept your deductions and go from there, Jo-Ann,” Annette continues. “A profiler going bad is going to make waves like you've never seen before in Washington, not that they'll be noticeable outside the agency, and there is going to be some serious re-evaluation of our criteria for psych testing of all field agents. On one paw I could kiss you for that, it's needed done for a long time. On the other paw, I'm half tempted to shoot you because now I'm going to get to go through that all over again. I think I'll forgive you, though.”

“If you've been checking up on him, I'll bet just about anything you want to name that he's done this before. His technique is too smooth to have developed in the last few months.”

Annette gets a very disgusted look. “Yeah. I know. We've been checking back, and he seems to have a pattern of once every three years or thereabout, going back at least fifteen years. In a different state almost every time, that's why no fur has spotted the pattern before now. His first kill here was about three and a half years ago, and the one that started this mess a few months ago fits that pattern, too. He's gone nuts since, probably because he's on the task force that's trying to find him, and he thinks he'll never be caught because of that.”

Joe, with an evil glint in his eye, says, “We'll just have to prove him wrong, won't we.”

###

Esmerelda picks up her blanket so that it conceals the sheet beneath it and moves into the corner

of the cell, beneath the security camera. She has been doing this for weeks now, and the guards are used to her behavior. The general opinion is that she's trying for what little privacy she can have in her situation. And this is true, as far as it goes.

I'm glad I fired that useless weasel. He was a terrible lawyer, and he refused to help me get out of here. I just don't understand why he behaved like that. I didn't do anything wrong, I was just trying to protect my daughter from the low-life that had abducted her and turned her against her family. The poor thing, I wish I had been able to help her. She's probably had that horrible hybrid kit by now and she's been so brainwashed that she wants to keep it.

WELL, THE PUBLIC DEFENDER THEY'VE ASSIGNED ME IS EVEN WORSE THAN THAT WEASEL, BUT THAT DOESN'T MATTER ANY MORE. THAT INCOMPETENT FEMME WILL HAVE A REAL SURPRISE IN THE MORNING.

The guard should be along to check me in about twenty minutes or so, they're used to my doing this by now. Then I'll have a few hours before they check on me again. Sleeping here is uncomfortable, but it's been worth it. Tonight I escape this place. Finally!

When the guard comes by on his evening round, he sees her in her usual position, scrunched up in the corner beneath the camera. He feels a brief moment of pity for the skunkette, but it is quickly quashed as he remembers why she's here.

Later, Esmerelda peeks out from her blankets. The cell block is dark and all the other furs in sight seem to be asleep.

Rising cautiously, she makes sure she stays out of the camera's view as she sets the blanket and sheet down. Straining, she climbs the bars so she can reach the camera's mount on the wall. She stretches and manages to catch the mount in her paws, and she dangles briefly from the device before dropping back to the floor.

She settles down on the floor and, with a slightly manic smile on her muzzle, she starts twisting the sheet into a rope.

###

Hearing a commotion in the cell block, the guard checks his cameras and finds that almost all of the inmates are out of bed and they seem to be yelling. Turning up the sound, he is nearly deafened by the uproar. Adjusting the volume, he is unable to make any sense of the yelling, although he hears "stink" fairly clearly several times. The only other identifiable words are profanities.

"What the hell?" he mutters to himself. It's 2:30 in the morning, and he has no idea what would have the entire cellblock in an uproar at this time of night. None of the interlocks or alarms are indicating any problem, so he gets up and opens the door as he prepares to enter the solitary confinement cellblock of the county jail.

He is hit in the face with a strong skunk musk that is spreading throughout the block, and he knows instantly who is responsible, as they only have one skunk in residence.

"How the hell did she get that harness off?" he yells as he closes the door and calls for backup.

A few minutes later, with three matrons and two more male officers, they enter the block with masks in place. The inmates start their complaints instantly, and are ignored for the moment. As they approach the cell in question, they stop, stunned in disbelief.

“Call the medics!” the first guard calls, sending one of the others back down to the office at a dead run. Completing the unlock sequence he had started in the security office, he gets the door open and they manage to get the middle-aged skunkette down from the camera mount where she has hung herself with her bedsheet.

Cursing at the mess below the body, and stepping very gingerly to avoid it, the guards get the body over to the bunk and start CPR immediately. When the medics arrive shortly after, they take over with swift efficiency, then move the body onto a gurney and head out for the ambulance that has been called.

By this time, the night lieutenant has arrived and has taken charge.

“Let's get this mess cleaned up,” he orders, referring to the bodily wastes left when the femme's sphincters relaxed at death. This is the source of the mixed stench of skunk musk, feces and urine.

With a scowl of disgust, the junior guard leaves to get the bio-hazard cleanup kit. The lieutenant turns and says, “You help him. You were on duty when this happened. We'll see what the investigation has to say. Oh, and use a lot of deodorizer.”

###

“Oh, CRAP!” Jo-Ann says, sitting down abruptly. “Crap, crap, crap. She doesn't need this. She's got kits that are less than five weeks old, and she just doesn't need this. What the hell was that old bat thinking, anyway?”

Lt. Lutrans regards her with compassion. “I don't think she was thinking at all. But it doesn't matter at this point. What does matter is that the department thinks you are the right fur to tell her. Are you?”

Jo-Ann buries her face in her paws. “Probably,” she mumbles. “But I don't want to.”

“I know, Jo-Ann. I understand. This is one of the hardest things an officer ever has to do. It's a lot worse when it's someone you're close to. At the same time, it'll be a lot easier on her if you are the one to tell her.”

Lifting her muzzle from her paws, an expression of absolute misery on her muzzle, Jo-Ann nods. “I'll do it. Give me a few minutes to get myself presentable again, and I'll go do it.”

“Take Ange with you. I think she'll appreciate having femmes there.”

###

Kass is sitting in the personnel office at Naval Station Everett. The petty officer handling his paperwork is competent and quick, and this phase of his inprocessing to the base is going well. The finance office is also quick and efficient, when he gets there, much to his relief and approval.

When he gets to the housing office, things slow down.

“Captain, as a single officer we will place you in BOQ,” the housing specialist, a wolf, says.

“Actually, I was planning to stay off base for the first month or so. I will be getting married June 25th, and I hope to move into base housing at that time. Is there a waiting list for that?”

“Oh. Congratulations, Captain. Let me check.” The wolf, a petty officer, pulls up a file on his computer.

“We don't have anything available right now, sir, but there will be a house coming open on July 12th, if that's acceptable.”

“Actually, that will work out very well. We will be back from our honeymoon shortly before that, and it will give us some time to get our belongings packed. How large is the house?”

“It's a standard three-bedroom unit, sir. About 2000 square feet. It's even on Captain's Row.”

“That is quite a coincidence. We don't have any kits at this point, obviously, but who knows? They do tend to arrive.”

“That's quite okay, sir. For officers at your rank, unless there are special circumstances, like a lot of kits, this is a standard unit.”

From what Kel had told him of her visits with Nona, 'lots of kits' was a very real possibility, he muses.

“Very good. The next time I'm assigned here I may need one of the larger homes, my fiancée has mentioned 'lots of kits' more than once. If you will put me down for that unit, I will let her know, and she can start terrorizing me with decor.”

“I know how you feel, sir,” the wolf chuckles, “my wife does the same to me.”

###

Shaking with nervousness, Jo-Ann opens the front door to CCN and enters, with Ange right behind her. She tells Ange, “Remember, nudity is normal in this house, so don't be startled.”

She calls for Gwen, “Gwen, are you here?”

“In the den, Jo-Ann. What are you doing here at this time of day?” Gwen answers, coming into the living room.

“Gwen, this is Detective Ange Kerry, who works with me. Ange, Gwen Coona.”

“It's good to meet you, Ange. Why are the two of you here?”

“Gwen,” Jo-Ann says, her nervousness disappearing, “let's go sit down, please.”

After they're seated, Gwen looks at her in puzzlement. "What's this all about, Jo-Ann?"

"Gwen, we have some bad news, and there's no way to say it gently," Jo-Ann tells her softly. "Your mother committed suicide last night in Boston."

Gwen sits back in the couch, her expression neutral. After a moment, she says, "Oh. I see."

"Well," she continues, "I am not really surprised, although this is unexpected. In a lot of ways, it simplifies things so very much, as I know you're aware. You don't need to worry about me; I'm not going to get hysterical about this. My mother and I have been at odds for many years, and I can't say I'm sorry she's gone. She stamped out any love I felt for her a long time ago."

Ange looks at Jo-Ann in surprise. "You knew this?"

Jo-Ann looks somewhat discomfited as she replies, "Not all of it, but I had a pretty good idea. I do live here a lot of the time."

"Oh. So that's why the lieutenant chose you to do this, even though you're not someone who would normally have this duty. I see."

Jo-Ann smiles at Ange, "No, I don't think you really do, but I'll explain it later if you like. For now, let's be here for Gwen."

Turning to Gwen, she asks, "Do you need anything from us, Gwen? Would it help if we stayed for a while?"

"Yes, it would, Jo-Ann, Ange," Gwen says with a smile. "Just keep me company for a bit while I think this through. I have a hell of a lot of planning to do and almost no time to do it."

###

"Phil," Lynne says when he answers the intercom, "Gwen Coona for you on line 2."

"Thanks, Lynne," he replies, picking up on line 2. "This is Phil, Gwen, what can I do for you?"

"Leona is going to hate me for this, Phil, but I need you to prepare for an immediate trip to Boston. I suggest you plan for an extended stay."

"Oh?" he replies. "What's the occasion?"

"Not a pleasant one, Phil," Gwen tells him. "My mother committed suicide last night. That means I need to pick up the reins at HSE immediately. There are furs there that will rob the company blind if they're not supervised, if they haven't already. And when they're senior executives, they can do a lot of damage in a hurry."

"Whew! That's a lot to dump on me this early in the morning. Are you going, too?"

"I have to. Traveling with infants is going to be a really major pain, to the point that I'm seriously

considering a charter. Probably tomorrow. Want to come along?"

"Yes! That will be so much better than commercial, there's just no comparison."

"Will you take care of that then, please? I've got a lot to take care of here, and having that out of the way will be an immense help."

"Can do, Gwen. Anything else?" he says, quickly taking notes.

"Yes. I'm not going to be able to stay there very long, what with the twins. I doubt I'll be there much past the funeral and the reading of the will. I need you to stay and represent me. You will have my proxy and my power of attorney. I want that outfit moved to Seattle as quickly as it can be done. HSE, which is basically the board of directors and their staff, I want here in no more than ninety days. Harcourt Shipping and Smythe Pharmaceutical and Spice will take longer, but I think it can be done in six months, if they shake their tails."

"That's a really tight schedule, Gwen, and it will impact the bottom line. Are you sure you want it done that fast?"

"You'd better believe I do. If I have to run that outfit, and I do, then I'm going to do it here, where I can keep an eye on them. I expect to lose a lot of furs who won't relocate, but at least half of those will be well worth losing. I'll have more details for you tomorrow, on the plane. Do you have enough to get started?"

"Yes I do, Gwen. Looks like I'll have to be there until I can get a couple of trustworthy furs to put in charge, and then a bit longer to make sure they have it under control. I think that will do it for now."

"Oh, one other thing, Phil. We've talked about doing an audit of the books, you remember. I want that started yesterday."

"Got it. Okay, Gwen, we've both got a lot to get done. I'll call you with the flight time as soon as I have it. Talk to you later."

"Okay, Phil. And thanks. You're going to be a life-saver before this is over. Bye."

Hanging up, Phil gets on the intercom immediately. "Lynne, I need you in here, now. We've got a lot of work to get done in a hurry."

###

After she hangs up with Phil, Gwen checks the clock and sighs. It's time for another feeding. She gets up and heads into the kitchen, where she gets a mug of coffee ready for Rick.

"Rick," she says quietly to her sleeping mate, "Rick, get up. It's time to feed the twins again."

"Mmmph. Huh? Oh, okay sweetheart, I'll be there in a moment. Did you remember ... Oh, I smell it, thank you honey. I really need that cup."

Getting up and leaving the mug of coffee, Gwen moves into the nursery and checks her kits. They

are sleeping, but the way they are starting to squirm informs her that they will be waking momentarily. She smiles at them, and hearing Rick moving in their bedroom, she moves over to the old fashioned rocker and seats herself. Settling in, she gently washes her nipples in preparation for feeding.

When Rick comes in a moment later, he gathers up Randy and Kacy and brings them over to his wife, helping her get them settled comfortably. When both kits are feeding, he smiles at his wife. “They're beautiful, aren't they, honey?”

“Yes they are,” she agrees. Then, turning serious, she raises her head and stares at him.

“We have a lot of work to get done today, hon. Jo-Ann stopped by a little bit ago with some news. It seems that my mother has managed to do all of us a favor by committing suicide last night. That means that we, you, me and the twins, need to fly to Boston immediately. I need you to start packing for all of us. I will need at least two business suits, something suitable for the funeral, and some comfortable casual clothes. You'll need something similar. And of course, we'll need a steamer trunk for the stuff we need for these two.”

Rick is startled. “She what? Damn.” He pauses, considering, then continues, “Then again, it's not really very surprising. So we're going for the funeral. What else? Why the business suits?”

“I'm going to take over HSE, Harcourt Shipping and Smythe Pharmaceutical and Spices, effective immediately. I've already talked to Phil Leonis, and he's making arrangements for a charter to take us to Boston. We leave tomorrow, and he's going to call as soon as he has a flight time. I think we can stay five or six days, take care of the funeral, listen when they read the will, and I'll start putting the fear of the right paw of the gods, namely me, into the minds of those fools on the board of HSE. Phil will be flying with us, and he'll be staying there to mind the store for me and get them moved here. I refuse to spend that much time in Boston when my home is here. All of the companies will be moving to Seattle, and quick, if I have anything to say about it.”

“Whew! That sounds like it's going to be a crazy few days, dear. We'll handle it, though. Kass and Kel can take care of the house, of course. I'm sure Jo-Ann will pitch in too, however much time she manages to spare. Well, you look like you have things under control here, so I'll go get started packing.”

Gwen smiles fondly at his back as he leaves the nursery.

###

Waiting for the phone to ring, Phil Leonis considers what he's going to say to his wife.

“Hello Leona. I have a problem, my dear.”

“Hi Phil. What's up?”

“I'm going to have to be out of town for an indefinite period, possibly several months, beginning tomorrow. And before you blow up, this is for Gwen and Rick Coona. Gwen's mother committed suicide last night, and Gwen is having to take over the reins of the company. Since she has newborn twins, this isn't exactly a good time for her to be hauling herself around the country.”

Leona pauses, then replies. “Okay, honey. I'm glad you told me that. How's Gwen feel about her

mother doing that?"

"Relieved would be the best description, I think. The two of them have been very seriously estranged for a good many years, and I don't think there was any way to reconcile them. We are flying out tomorrow on a charter, and Gwen, Rick and the twins will be coming back in a week or so. I'm staying to represent Gwen and be her representative on site. She's planning on really shaking up everything, and one of the things she's doing is moving everything out here to Seattle."

"Whew! She doesn't do things in a small way, does she?"

"Not in the least. Consider that she wants HSE, which is essentially the board of directors, out here in ninety days. And the other two companies here in six months."

Leona lets out a long, low whistle. "Wow. That isn't small, at all."

"No it isn't. I'm reading between the lines when I say this, but I am pretty sure that she is going to select me as her legal representative, and the firm as her law firm. If she does, it's a huge feather in my cap."

"Phil, you have got to stop shocking me like this! Do you mean to tell me that she's going to select you as the company lawyer?"

"I think so. She's said she's giving me her proxy and her power of attorney while I'm in Boston, so that I have the power to enforce her and my decisions while I'm handling this move."

"Damn! What's the reaction there, with your dad and the others?"

"I haven't had time to talk to anyone here, yet. I wanted you to know first."

"Thanks, honey. That is thoughtful."

"You deserve it. You also know that this is privileged information and it's not going to be in the news."

"Yes, dear. That was part of the lesson that Rick and Kass gave me. And thank them for me, again, please. They saved my career when they did that, and I'm only now beginning to realize what they did for me."

"They may have also saved our marriage, dear. I was nowhere near doing anything yet, but if things had gone on, I would have had to."

"I know," Leona says with a sigh, "and I didn't know what was wrong."

"Well, that's over now, and I am very thankful that it is."

"So am I. Will you be home tonight?"

"Yes, probably a bit later than usual, but I will be home. I'm hoping that a particular lioness will be waiting for me," he says with a grin, his tone saying more than his words.

“You know, she might just be hanging around,” Leona says with a sultry giggle, and the conversation descends into a few personal comments before they hang up.

Phil pauses momentarily, a pleasant smile wending its way across his muzzle. Then he shakes his head slightly and returns to the phone.

“Hi Gwen, it's Phil,” he says when the phone is answered. “Our flight will leave at 9am, which will put us into Boston about 5, their time. Does that work for you?”

“Thanks, Phil,” she replies. “Yes, that will work. Kass and Kel will drive us down.”

They spend a few minutes getting all the details in order, then they say their goodbyes, as both of them have a lot to accomplish.

###

Jo-Ann settles down at her desk, scowling slightly as she reaches for her coffee cup. She's been a bit fatigued recently, and she's mildly resentful that she needs the caffeine in the afternoon. Shaking her head, she dismisses that as being caused by the stress and overwork of investigating one William Jackson, the FBI profiler on the task force, and their primary suspect. Gathering the evidence is both slow and tricky, as they do not want to tip him off. Only three members of the task force are aware of this investigation, further limiting their efforts.

She has been working the paper trail, and Jack is out doing the field investigation. Since they have been doing this all along, it is not a noticeable change, and is therefore unlikely to raise any suspicions. The rest of the investigation is being handled by the FBI, as half of the murders have occurred in other states. While progress is not rapid, it is being made, and there are hopes that they will have enough evidence to make an arrest before any more furs are killed.

When Joe Fenrir stops at her desk, she looks up at him. “Good afternoon, Lieutenant. What can I do for you?”

“Can you come into my office, Jo-Ann? I have some information for you.”

“Yes, sir,” she says, rising.

In his office, with the door closed, he watches as she seats herself.

“Jo-Ann, do you have any premonitions about when he's going to strike again? He's about due, based on his recent actions.”

“No, sir,” she replies, “I don't. Those aren't something that can be forced, you know. They happen when they do. If I get any hints, believe me you'll be the first to know.”

“I understand, but you know why I have to ask,” he says, with an apologetic grin.

“I know, sir, and I wish I could tell you more.”

“Okay, let's see what else we can find to tie this bastard up.”

Rising, she answers, her tone grim, “I'm with you there. I would happily stand this fur up against the wall and shoot him myself.”

“I know, but let's let the courts handle it, shall we?”

“Yes, sir,” she answers before she leaves the office.

Back at her desk, she checks some new information that has just come in.

Sitting back a few minutes later, she sighs. *Nothing new, but more hints that he is a real psycho, like we didn't already know that. Hope Jack comes up with something.*

###

Kass enters the office of the commander of the Shore Patrol.

“Good morning, Commander Ryder. I'm Captain Ujinkhan,” he says, introducing himself.

The stallion, rising from his chair, salutes briskly in recognition of the CMH on Kass' chest.

Returning the salute, Kass gestures and both furs sit.

“Commander, I'm here to discuss certain facts relating to base security that may occur because I've been assigned here.”

“Oh? Why would that be, Captain?”

“I spent well over a decade in the SEALs in black ops, Commander. I managed to collect a number of potentially dangerous enemies, and a few of those are still alive. There is a chance that they may make attempts on my life while I'm here. I just wanted to give you a heads-up about the possibility.”

“I'm glad you have, Captain. Something like this is worth knowing, and I will have to consider raising awareness among the furs.”

“There are two international terrorist organizations that have placed a bounty on my head. If a fur succeeded, he could retire on those two bounties, as they total over \$300,000. With the publicity that is going to occur, between taking command of the new training facility and one or two other events, my low profile is going to be hard to maintain. I would also prefer, if possible, to be under arms at all times. I do have a local concealed carry permit for when I am off base, and I have been carrying continuously since I got it.”

“Ugh! That is not something I wanted to hear. That does explain why you feel the way you do, though. The permission will have to be discussed with the base commander, sir. Since you are not Shore Patrol or NCIS, it may be difficult to authorize.”

“I am not averse to concealed carry, Commander. And I believe you can authorize that on your own authority. Am I right?”

“Yes, sir, it is possible under certain circumstances. It has never come up before, and I'm not sure of the procedures. I will have to investigate that.”

“Talk with the Adjutant and the Admiral if you wish. I have no reason to keep this a secret from them. I do have a related issue, as well.”

“And that would be?” the stallion asks.

“My wife. I am getting married in about four weeks, and at that point she also becomes a potential target, especially as a hostage. I would like to obtain the same privileges for her.”

“I understand, sir, but with her being a civilian, it is all but impossible.”

“I doubt that, Commander, but if you are unable to authorize it, I will accept that refusal and then work my way up the chain of command until it is approved. Don't feel that I'm going over your head when I do that, because that isn't my intent. But I do intend that she be able to defend herself at need. The SP cannot be everywhere, and any fur with more than three brain cells working knows it.”

“You're right there, Captain. But a lot of furs don't have those three cells working.”

Kass chuckles, and replies, “Don't I know it. My fiancée, Kelso Vixxen, is one of the best pistol shots I've ever seen. She's in training right now for the next Olympic games, and I'll be very surprised if she doesn't bring home at least one gold. I won't be too surprised if she brings home all of them.”

“She's that good?” the stallion asks in amazement.

“Yeah. She out-shot me with my own pistol, the first time she picked it up.”

“Since I don't know your own abilities, Captain, I will withhold judgment on that.”

“She has multiple witnessed targets with fifty consecutive x-ring shots, at ranges from fifteen to twenty-five yards, Commander. Including one from the first time she used my pistol, and she's using a 45 to do it. I would not want her shooting at me, she just doesn't miss.”

“If we can get permission for her, and you for that matter, you both will have to go through qualification courses.”

“Not a problem for me, I've already taken a good many of those classes. In fact, since I'm instructor qualified, I probably already qualify. If my fiancée has problems it will be because she loses her temper with the instructors for going too slow or for underestimating her. She doesn't tolerate fools any better than I do.”

“From what you've told me about your background, sir, I doubt you tolerate them at all.”

“That's pretty close, Commander,” Kass replies with a chuckle. “They usually get about thirty seconds.”

###

Jo-Ann sits down at her desk with a cup of coffee and a cheese danish, a concession to the munchies this morning. Digging into her paperwork, she settles in for another day of searching for details to help nail their suspect.

When Jack comes over to her desk a few minutes later, she looks up questioningly. “Do you have anything new this morning?” she asks.

“Sure do, partner,” he replies. “Got something to share with you and the L. T. Come on.”

Grabbing her unfinished danish and empty coffee mug, she joins him, stopping for a refill at the coffee urn.

“You're drinking a lot more coffee than usual,” he comments.

“I know,” she replies, “but I've been kinda tired recently and it helps me stay alert.”

“Can't have too many lerts,” he answers with a chuckle.

“Spare me the morning jokes, please.”

“Why? They've always annoyed you before, so why should I stop now?”

Shifting her danish to her other paw, she slaps him on the shoulder. “Because you're you, twerp.”

“And good morning to you, too,” he says, entering Lt. Fenrir's office, including both of them in the greeting.

“Come on in,” Joe says, “seeing that you're already here.”

Closing the door, Jack sits down about the same time as Jo-Ann.

“Good morning, lieutenant, I've got some news for both of you.”

“Go ahead,” the wolf replies.

“I think we can nail him now, we just need to get a sample of his DNA. He goofed, and there were several strands of fur caught in the teeth of his last victim. They're on their way to the lab as I speak.”

“Finally,” Joe breathes in relief. “We really needed this.”

“I can get a DNA sample, easy,” Jo-Ann adds as she finishes off her danish. “He's shedding quite a bit right now, and I know I can get a tuft of that directly off him by teasing him about his grooming. I've been teasing him a bit about it already, and I'll get it this morning.”

“Good, Jo-Ann,” Joe replies. “Get it to me soonest and it'll be off to the lab as well. I hope we have a match.”

"I'm pretty sure we will ... ULP!" She suddenly gets a panicked look on her face and rushes out of the office.

Jack looks at Joe, and asks, "What was that all about?"

"I haven't a clue, but I'm sure we'll find out," Joe replies.

###

Gwen looks around, then looks at Rick. "Do we have everything, honey?"

"I think so. We'll have to use disposables while we're in Boston and we can buy them there. We have enough for today and tomorrow, and I've packed about ten outfits for each of them. The hotel will have laundry service, and that should keep us in outfits for the twins. I've packed a week's worth of clothes for each of us, both business and casual, plus outfits for the funeral. I think we're set."

"Kass, we're ready to go!" Gwen calls.

Kelso sticks her head into the bedroom and says, "Well, let's get to it then. Do you have your requisite three steamer trunks loaded?"

"Yes, dear," Rick replies with a chuckle. "Here they are."

"Okay. You and Kass can handle the luggage. Gwen and I will take care of the twins."

"You two always pick on us males," Rick says in a grumbling voice, belied by his grin.

"Of course we do. You wouldn't know what to do if we didn't!" Gwen says.

When Kass pokes his head in, Rick waves him over. "We're in charge of the luggage. Let's get it over with."

Kass just shakes his head in amusement as he grabs the first two large suitcases and heads for the garage. Rick follows him with two more.

Pulling the Rolls-Royce into the private aviation area, Kass looks around and then spots the company they're headed for. Pulling in and parking carefully, he turns to the back and tells Rick and Gwen, "We're here."

Gwen is just settling Kacy into a nap, and she winks at him. "They're both fed and changed, and they should be asleep in a few minutes. That'll let us get everything loaded without interruptions."

"That sounds good, lover," Kass replies. "Oh, I've got something here for you, and them," he adds, handing over several small packages. "They're called EarPlanes, and they are pressure reducing earplugs. Little ones can't clear their ears and these slow the pressure changes a lot and let the ears adapt slowly and without pain. It will help them more than you can know. There are two sets there for each of them, so you'll have a new set for the return flight. You'll want to fit them before they seal the plane, and if you can, leave them in until after you land. They're good for two or three flights, but they're not expensive and the assurance of having a new set for each flight is well worth it."

Gwen gets a startled look on her face. "I never thought of that. Thank you, Kass, that is going to be a major help."

Kass grins at her. "I've flown often enough that I keep a couple pair with me whenever I'm flying commercial. Whenever I hear a baby start to howl, I immediately send a pair over with a flight attendant. It's worth it to me to have the peace and quiet."

Gwen leans forward and gives him a big kiss. "Thank you," she says sincerely.

"You're welcome," he replies. "Now, let's get this show on the road."

Entering the company office, he looks around and grabs a luggage carrier and returns to the Rolls, where he starts loading the luggage with Rick's help.

When they roll the carrier back into the office, Gwen and Kel are surrounded by the office staff, Phil and Leona, and Lynne (who appears to be accompanying Phil), showing off the twins.

One of the males comes over and tells them, "Mr. Coona, I'm Carl, I'll take care of your luggage. We'll be taking off in about half an hour."

"Thanks, Carl," Rick says to the lemur. "I suppose I'd better go see to my wife and kits."

Waving cheerily, the lemur heads off with the luggage, leaving Rick with the carry-ons.

Leona pulls out of the crowd and comes over to them. "I can't thank the two of you enough," she says. "You saved my career and my marriage with your advice. Especially you, Kass." She hugs them both and gives Kass a kiss, as well.

"You're welcome, Leona," Kass replies. "You're a special lady and I knew what was going on pretty quickly. I'm glad you were able to make the changes. You're the one that did the work. I just knew what you had to do."

"And I'm very thankful that you did," she answers. "I didn't have a clue."

"Well, it's changed now," Rick says, "and it looks like the changes have been very positive. Congratulations are deservedly yours. You did very well."

"Thanks," she replies, her eyes soft, "both of you." She turns and walks back to the others, leaving Kass and Rick.

"Well, that was a little surprising," Rick says.

"Not really. She's said that before, and she means it every time. She keeps repeating it because she knows how badly she had things screwed up, and I think you understand that. After all, it did take several sessions with each of us for her to get her head turned around."

"Yeah, I know," Rick tells Kass. "She just doesn't need to keep repeating it. I know why she is, though, and I can accept that."

“Let's go gather the ladies and start getting aboard, Rick. You guys need to be on your way.”

“Thanks, Kass. We'll be back in about a week. We'll keep you informed.”

“Good enough. Take care and we'll see you then.”

###

“Jo-Ann, honey, what's wrong?” Ange asks as the raccoon bursts into the ladies room.

Jo-Ann heads straight for the toilet, where she vomits up her breakfast and her danish, along with several cups of coffee.

Ange comes over and supports her, helping her to her footpaws when she's done, and helping with the clean-up. “Jo-Ann, what's wrong? Why did that happen?”

Shaking her head, Jo-Ann replies, “I don't have a clue. This has just started out of nowhere. I've thrown up my breakfast three of the last five days.”

Ange looks at her in surprise. “No other symptoms?”

“Nary a one.”

“Let me look at you, girl.”

“Okay.”

Looking her over, and checking several things closely, Ange says, “Hmmm. Nausea, early morning queasies, and nothing else?”

“Nope, that's it.”

“Girl, get yourself to the doctor. I'll bet the rabbit dies. You been fooling around without protection?”

Jo-Ann just looks at her friend. Then she shakes her head in disbelief. “I didn't expect to catch this quick, that's for sure.”

“You planned this?” Ange yelps.

“Yeah, but I just stopped the birth control pills about eight weeks ago. No way I should have caught this fast.”

“It happens, and it's happened to you. Congratulations?”

“Yep. I want this, and my clock is ticking. Not enough to panic, but I thought I'd better get started.”

“You know who the sire is?”

“Certainly. And he wants this, too.”

“And...” Ange coaxes.

“Nope. It's nobody's business but ours, and that's all I'm going to say. Now, I need to get back to my desk. Got a lot to get done.”

“Okay, honey. The best thing I know for morning sickness is saltines and soda. Sprite works good, so does 7-UP. You really need to back off on the caffeine.”

“I'll keep that in mind. Thanks, Ange.”

###

When she exits the ladies' room, Jo-Ann very nearly bounces off of William Jackson's chest. As they recoil away from each other, Jo-Ann grins.

“Trying to shed all that excess fluff on me, are you?” she asks, teasingly.

“Oh, for Pete's sake. Don't you ever get tired of teasing me?” he replies, with a mixture of exasperation and good humor.

“Nope. It's good for you,” Jo-Ann replies as she plucks a large tuft of his fur off his neck.

Showing it to him, she continues, “See, it doesn't match my fur at all. Gotta be yours.”

“Of course it is. But since you have it now, I'll let you dispose of it. Hope you can find a trash can large enough.”

“Oh, I think I'll manage, William.”

“Good. See you at the meeting this afternoon?”

“I'll be there,” Jo-Ann replies, handling the tuft of fur carefully. As soon as she gets to her desk, the fur goes in an evidence bag, which she logs, and then the fur is on its way to the lab.

Chapter 24

Good News

Jo-Ann sits down and looks at her father. “So?” she asks.

“Yes, honey, you're pregnant, I'm guessing about six weeks along. Do you want me to be your OB/GYN?”

“That's a silly question, Pops. Of course I do.”

“May I ask who the sire is, or is that another silly question?”

“If you're asking, you already know the answer,” she says with a grin.

Winking at his daughter, he laughs in reply, “Good choice, sweetie. I was kind of hoping you'd hook up with him, before he got married. It looks like you did, anyway, although not quite like I thought you would. Does Gwen know?”

“Know? Who do you think pushed me into the bed?”

Charles feels his eyebrows rise at this response. “She did? Then again, in that house ...”

“Pops, it's not just a house, it's a home. A real home, for every fur that lives there, even part-timers like me.”

“It's just ...”

“Pops, Rick and Gwen both feel that love is meant to be shared. Both of them say that love shared is love multiplied, not divided. It's like a mother's love for her children. It doesn't matter how many she has, she still has plenty of love for all of them. In the Coona family, it isn't just restricted to mother's love, it's all love. Any love you have for any fur. Can you understand that?”

“I can see it intellectually, yes. In practice, though, I would expect at least some jealousy.”

“It hasn't happened yet, and I don't see it happening, ever. You know this ring I have,” she says, holding up her Family Ring, “it's a visible sign that I have been adopted into the Coona family. I am a full member of that family, in every way. I even have the right to use the Coona name, although I don't. Right now there are seven of these rings. So, in effect, I have six spouses to help me raise this kit, and to take care of him or her if something happens to me. That's a lot more than a traditional marriage offers. The other six rings belong to three couples, who love each other very much, they just include the rest of us in that love as well.”

“I can guess who the other two couples are, then. It sounds like an idyllic situation.”

“It can be. We have our bad moments, like everyone does. Right now, Rick and Gwen are in Boston, taking care of her mother's estate.”

“Oh? I wasn't aware she had died.”

“She committed suicide in jail, and I was the one that had to tell Gwen. Apparently it's quite a mess, politically. Gwen is going for the funeral and the reading of the will, although that's really just a formality, and to take over the companies. Rick and the twins are with her, they will all be back in a

few days.”

“I’m glad Rick’s there for her. And I can’t see her leaving her twins behind, either. Any idea how they coped with flying?”

“I haven’t talked to them yet, so I can’t really say. Kass had something he called “EarPlanes” that he was going to give to Gwen, for the twins. They’re special ear plugs that slow down the pressure change so it doesn’t hurt. At least, that’s how he explained it to me.”

“I haven’t heard of those,” Charles says, as he writes down the name. “But if they work, I can see how they’d seem heaven-sent to those flying with children.”

“Kass says he always carries a few pair when he’s flying commercial. Says it saves his sanity.”

“I’ll take that as a recommendation, then. Good information to have.”

“Yes, it is. And back to our earlier subject, Gwen is moving her companies out here to Seattle. She wants the Board of Directors out here in 90 days, and everything else in six months. It seems pretty ambitious, but she has her lawyer staying behind in Boston to keep everything moving on schedule. I think it’ll happen pretty much like she wants.”

“It’s certainly ambitious, but it’s do-able, too. I don’t know if she has anyplace in mind for her headquarters, but I heard yesterday, on the Q.T., that the top two floors of the Smith Tower are being vacated rather abruptly, and the building’s owners are pulling their hair out. It seems they need the rent from those two floors pretty badly. You might let Gwen know about that. She can probably get a pretty good deal on a lease under the circumstances.”

“Thanks, Pops, I will let her know. She should be calling tonight, too. So it’s really good timing.”

“Family should stick together. Now, you need to buy some neo-natal vitamins and start taking those every day, call or see me whenever you have questions, and I want you to make an appointment for next month.”

Jo-Ann grins as she gets up, “You bet, this kit is going to be spoiled rotten, starting right now. He or she won’t get to be a brat, though.”

“That sounds like the right way to do it, hon. You take care of yourself.”

“Thanks, Pops,” she says as she gives him a hug.

###

“Phil, today is just going to be introductions and a declaration of intent,” Gwen says, as she, Phil and Lynne walk toward the Board Room. “Until the will is read and certain other items taken care of, all assets of the board are going to be frozen, effective right now. Harcourt Shipping and Smythe Pharmaceuticals and Spices will continue to operate, but only routine operations.”

“As I told you on the flight, there are two, maybe three, members of the Board that we will want to keep, if they’re willing to relocate. None of those have any significant clout on the board, they’re there for show, as much as anything. One is there just because he’s a hybrid, so they can point at him and say “See, we’re integrated.” The rest of them are crooks, and none of them are good enough to keep their activities completely hidden. A couple of them are downright dumb, to put it bluntly. All of

them, though, are connivers and con artists, and I think all of them are purists, as well. And you know my attitude about that.”

“When is the audit starting?” she continues.

“It started this morning, when they opened the doors. Caught everyone off-guard and they didn't have time to hide anything, Gwen,” Phil replies with a predatory grin.

“Good,” she replies, with a matching grin. “That's exactly what I wanted. I want them shaking in their boots. I know we took them unaware and they're off balance right now. I intend to keep them off balance and too busy worrying about hiding what they've done to fight me.”

“We've made a good start, I think,” Phil answers, as he steps forward to open the door to the Board Room.

###

The next morning, as she sits down with him, Gwen starts off by saying, “Phil, I need you to contact your father this morning. I have a lead on a site for HSE in Seattle.”

Phil looks at her, his eyes widened in surprise. “You do? How did that happen?”

“I called home last night and Jo-Ann was there. Apparently her father heard that the top two floors of the Smith Tower are being vacated without much, if any, notice and the building owners are in a bit of a tizzy,” Gwen says with a self-satisfied smile.

“That should make the negotiations a bit easier, anyway. Any idea how many furs know about this?” he asks, smiling in return.

“Not many, Charles said he heard it on the Q.T. Probably through one of his professional friends.”

“Good friends make life easier, don't they?” Phil comments as he adds a reminder to the scheduler on his laptop. “Got any other surprises for me this morning?”

“Nope,” Gwen says as she sinks gracefully into a chair. “I hate all this office politics stuff,” she grumbles, “and I'm going to stamp it out once everything's back in Seattle.”

“Good luck on that,” Phil replies with a knowing grin, “it seems to be endemic once you have more than four or five furs together.”

“I know. It's impossible to eradicate, but by all that's holy, I'm going to make sure that it's minimized. Even if I wind up hanging a few examples up by their tails.”

“It'll take that much, or more,” he replies with a chuckle. “And you know it.”

Gwen just grumps, then grins back. “Thanks, Phil.”

“For what?”

“For being a friend, and letting me grumble at you.”

“It's a two-way street, you know,” he tells her with a smirk.

Gwen just sits back in the chair and grins at him.

“And tell your father to keep an eye and an ear open for dock space, warehouses, and container storage. We're going to need all of that soon enough, along with a building or two for the other two companies to headquarter in. If we're lucky, we'll find a couple warehouses with enough office space already built in.”

“He's already looking, although your little tidbit on the Smith Tower will take a lot of the pressure off, which I know he'll appreciate.”

“How did he take the announcement you were coming here?”

“Shock. Then disbelief, and then you should have seen him smile.”

“I know what he's thinking, and he's right,” Gwen says as her grin expands into a smile.

“About what?” Phil asks.

“Two things, actually. First, your firm will be my corporate law firm.”

“That will make him ecstatic, to say the least. What's second?”

“Well, if you want the job, I'd like you to be the corporate attorney.”

“Umph!” Phil says, sitting back in his chair. “I was thinking it was a possibility, but not this soon. I thought you'd make that decision once everyone was back in Seattle. And I thought you said no more surprises.”

“It's something that needs to be decided a lot sooner than that, and I know enough about it to do the research and recognize the ability to do the job.” Gwen adopts a mischievous expression as she asks, “Besides, I think you already knew. Do you accept?”

“Of course. I'd be a fool to refuse. When should I tell the company?”

“When you call them this morning, Phil,” she smiles. “The decision is made, you've accepted and I don't see them refusing. For the time being, they will receive the same retainer that the current firm receives, that contract is also being terminated this morning; I have too many other irons in the fire to do any negotiation on fees right now. I'll take care of renegotiating once I'm home. You will receive the same salary as the current attorney, whom you can have the pleasure of escorting from the building this morning. I expect he'll be up for a disbarment hearing in a few months. We can revisit your salary later, when there's time.”

“I will accept that duty with a smile,” Phil says, his smile rather predatory. “I already have enough evidence to indict him on malfeasance, and I've only scratched the surface.”

“On that note,” he continues, “we will have to find an attorney licensed in Massachusetts to handle the legal paperwork. I have not been admitted to the bar here, and there really isn't time for that now.”

“Keep me informed,” Gwen tells him, “but handle it yourself. When you call your father, ask him for a recommendation. If he doesn't have one, he can get one in short order, I think.”

###

“Good morning, Dad,” Phil says, opening the conversation.

“Good morning, Phil. Something is up if you're calling me this early, I just barely got sat down before the phone rang.”

“It's a good thing you're so consistent. It makes it easy to know when to call,” Phil replies with a chuckle. “And yes, something is up. Something good, actually.”

“And it obviously has something to do with what you're doing. Do you want me to guess, or are you just going to tell me?” George Leonis asks, with a grin on his muzzle.

“Since you'd probably guess right, I'll just tell you. Gwen came in this morning and announced that our firm is now her corporate law firm, if we want it. And she offered me the position as the corporate attorney, which I accepted. My salary and our corporate retainer will be the same as the former furs who held those positions until this morning. She is willing to renegotiate once she's back in Seattle, but I don't think I'd bother, Dad. The fees are very good, probably better than we'd get if we did renegotiate.”

“That's great news, son. We'll be adding a few new paws to handle the extra workload, but that's actually good news. And congratulations on your new position. I will keep your office here for you, although I don't think you'll be in it that much. You can take Lynne with you when you move over.”

“Thank you, sir. I was going to ask about that.”

“I'll also keep that hint in mind, son, about the fees. Thank you for the heads up. What else do you have?”

“Gwen got a tip that the top two floors of the Smith Tower are vacant, or are going to be very soon. The tenants are breaking their lease, and the building owners are screaming. Apparently they need the rent pretty badly. Gwen thinks that space will be a good choice for HSE.”

“That's news to me, but I know both of the owners and I'll make a call as soon as I'm done with you. If I can guarantee occupancy, I doubt I'll have any trouble.”

“That's great, Dad. All of HSE will be there in no more than ninety days, and the early arrivals in about half that, if not sooner. I know that's going to push things a good bit, but I also know it can be done. Who is it that's moving out?” Phil asks.

“A law firm that thought they were bigger fish than they are. They just bit off too much lease and now they're paying the price. They're not a bad firm, but the young bucks in charge just didn't realize how expensive a piece of real estate like that really is. They got their antlers trimmed pretty severely, but they'll recover and be a lot better for it.”

Phil chuckles. “And that tells me who it is. Okay, that means the remodeling should be fairly minimal. I'll have a preliminary staffing report for you in about a week, and you can get with an architect and designer to get started on reorganizing the place. Gwen should be back by then, and I know she'll have her paw in.”

“Oh, she also wanted me to remind you that they are also going to need new headquarters buildings, warehouses, container storage and dock space. Harcourt Shipping will be on the docks, of course, and Smythe Pharmaceuticals and Spices will need a warehouse or two, and both need to have a truck terminal as well, although if it's large enough, they could share that. We'll need all of that quick, too, she wants both of those companies moved and operational in six months.”

“That is going to be harder. Dedicated dock space in particular. Once we have that, the container storage won't be too bad. Warehouses are do-able, but I don't know how close to the docks I can get. I assume she wants the company headquarters staff in the warehouse, if possible?”

“Gwen just walked in, Dad. I'm going to put this on speaker so she can join us. Just a moment.”

As soon as Phil signals her, Gwen introduces herself, “Good morning, Mr. Leonis. I'm Gwen Coona. We haven't met face to face yet, but I'll take care of that next week, when I'm back there.”

“Good morning, Gwen. Please call me George, I expect we're going to get to know each other quite well, given our new relationship.”

“Ah. I was sure that would be the first thing Phil told you. I take it you have accepted, then?”

“Absolutely. I am delighted that you chose our firm to be your corporate law firm. I am a bit jealous of my son, though, since he gets to be the corporate attorney.”

Gwen laughs delightedly. “Oh, I'm sure you're jealous. I'd be willing to let you trade jobs with him, if you'd like. Do you think he could handle being in your chair?”

Phil is staring at Gwen, with a “caught in the headlights” stare, and is jarred when his father laughs back. “Gwen, you're evil! He's not ready for this chair yet, and won't be for years. And he knows it. Let the poor cub down gently, please, I want to keep him intact for a few more years yet.”

Gwen is cracking up at Phil's expression. “I'll try, George, but you should see him right now,” she replies, trying to keep the laughter out of her voice, and failing. “I wish I had a camera with me,” she continues as Phil tries to gather himself back together.

“I'll bet!” George replies. “And I'd love to have that picture, I'd frame it and put it up on the wall in the lobby.”

Phil, barely able to speak, answers, “Dad, I know you would do that, and I'm just thankful Gwen doesn't have a camera right now. A year from now I'll be able to laugh about this with you, but right now, can we please get back to business, so I can try to get my mind working again?”

###

Kass stops and stretches luxuriously as he gets out of his Morgan Roadster. It's very early on Monday morning, what is colloquially called 'o-dark-thirty' in many military outfits. He reflects briefly on Kel's reaction to his early rising, her disbelief was almost comical. Chuckling at the memory, he reaches back into the car and gathers up the keys he obtained yesterday.

Stepping up to the door of the vacant barracks, Kass unlocks the door and enters what is going to be his new headquarters building. The three story concrete building has been standing empty for two or three years, but appears, on the surface, to still be in excellent condition. Per his normal routine, he has arrived early, to begin his inspection before the other furs that are due in a couple hours.

Two hours later, as he sits in his car completing his notes, two other vehicles arrive. Jeff Salters, his chief of staff, is in one, and a lieutenant from the headquarters quartermaster's office, a red fox he had dealt with previously, is in the other.

“I knew I should have been here a couple of hours ago, sir,” the Senior Chief Petty Officer says,

saluting.

“You know me too well, Chief,” Kass replies as he returns the salute. Turning to the other officer, he continues, “Good to see you again, Lieutenant Foxx.”

“And you, sir,” that worthy replies, with a salute, which Kass duly returns.

“I have inspected this building, and overall, it's acceptable. There are some specific items that need repair, though. Here's the list,” he says as he hands it to the junior officer. “It needs a very thorough cleaning and also needs to be repainted prior to occupancy.”

“Very good, sir,” the lieutenant replies as he peruses the list. “All of these can be readily handled by the end of the week, as can the cleaning. The painting should be completed early next week.”

“Excellent. Chief Salters will have a list of specific office furnishings we shall require immediately. Outside of that, normal furnishings should be adequate. That list will undoubtedly grow as we get settled in. I will try to keep the surprises minimized.”

“Thank you, sir,” the fox replies. “Too many officers think that supplies just magically appear when they're requisitioned.”

“I spent some time in charge of a supply base, Lieutenant, I understand your position quite well.”

“Thank you, sir. The consideration is appreciated.”

“And it won't adversely affect my requests, either,” Kass replies with a wink. “Shall we begin our inspection tour, gentlefurs?”

###

Kelso Vixxen sighs as she completes her daily exercise routine. “What's on the schedule today, Karl?” she asks her coach.

“What's the problem, Kel?” he asks.

“I'm just a bit stressed. The wedding is getting close and it's taking a lot of my time and energy.”

“How tense are you today?”

“I'm not sure,” she says, rotating her shoulders and neck experimentally. “It doesn't feel too bad.”

Stepping up behind her, Karl starts massaging her neck and shoulders. He stops after a moment, and steps back. “I'll go get the massage table,” he tells her.

Looking at her coach with a bit of surprise, she asks, “Am I that bad?”

“You are too tense to shoot well, so we need to take care of that first. Then we'll discuss your training schedule for the next few weeks. After that, if it's not too late, we'll get a few rounds in.”

###

“Good afternoon, furs and femmes. As most of you know, my name is Lieutenant Joe Fenrir, and I am the officer in charge of the investigation of the “Bellevue Butcher”, as the press has so colorfully named him. I am here for our regular briefing of the press on our progress.”

At this point, there is an outburst of questions from the assembled press, because the entire investigative team is present and standing behind him, rather than just the Lieutenant, as it had been at previous briefings.

As he waits behind his barricade of microphones, Joe is quiet and his face gives nothing away, patiently waiting for the pandemonium to recede.

“I will not be answering questions today, nor will any member of our investigative team. So don't ask, the only reply you're going to receive is silence.”

This statement causes another uproar, and again, Joe waits until it fades.

“What I do have for you today is the announcement that we have a suspect, and he will be arrested momentarily.”

As this announcement is made, and the furor rises once again, higher than before, Jo-Ann stands quietly in her place, just behind William Jackson, and gets her pawcuffs ready.

When quiet returns, Jo-Ann quickly cuffs her fur, and announces, “William Jackson, you are under arrest, as the Bellevue Butcher.” Leading her prisoner off the stage, she can hear Joe Fenrir reading the rest of his prepared statement to a stunned silence, and telling the press that printed copies of the statement are available at the door at their rear.

The Lieutenant and the rest of the investigative team quickly exit the stage as soon as Joe is finished, and gather in a nearby conference room. Jo-Ann has taken her prisoner further into the station, to be booked.

Annette Cooper is waiting in the conference room, and after she has been introduced, she briefs the team on the covert investigation, giving full credit to Jo-Ann for breaking the case. She also briefs them on the federal charges and possible charges in other states. With the DNA evidence they have, their case is very strong, and a search warrant has been issued for Jackson's home, and a Crime Scene Investigation team is already on scene. Their preliminary findings, which she has just received, depict a seriously deranged fur, with a torture chamber right out of the Spanish Inquisition, and fully updated with all the modern 'conveniences', such as electro-shock equipment. If any of the team wish to examine the scene after the CSI furs are finished, they may do so, although she recommends they schedule themselves for counseling after that. The CSI team is already scheduled for counseling, at their own request.

This statement causes a startled silence, as CSI furs are known to be effectively immune to crime scene conditions. Annette waits for her statement to sink in before she continues.

“Does anyone here want to view this?” she asks. “Just so you know, I will be going there, because I will have to testify about it. I don't want to go, I have to. The Lieutenant and Detective Procyon will also be going, due to their part in the investigation. The three of us have also scheduled ourselves for counseling. Sergeant Canus may have to go as well, although we don't believe it will be necessary. We are trying to avoid that if we can.”

Jack looks relieved at her statement. As the rest of the team thinks, they gradually come to a unanimous decision as, one by one, they all shake their heads, saying, “No.”

Annette looks around the table, “I think that is a wise decision, for all of you. I believe you will find the crime scene photos bad enough, without seeing the actual site. Thank you for all the effort you have put into this case. We'll all be debriefed over the next few days.”

###

Meanwhile, Lynne is interviewing the fur assigned to assist them at HSE.

“Good morning, I'm Lynne Smythe, personal assistant to Mr. Leonis, who is Mrs. Coona's attorney. He's going to be handling things here once Mrs. Coona goes back to Seattle.”

“Good morning, Lynne, I'm Veronica Dae Wynn. I've been with HSE about six months, working on Mr. Hansen's staff.”

Lynne takes a good look at the femme. She's a skunk hybrid of some sort, although the other species isn't obvious. She's tall, about 5'10", and well padded, though still quite shapely. *Zaftig would be a completely appropriate description*, she thinks. *Or Reubenesque*. Her fur is mostly black, reflecting her heritage, although her stripes are unique, a pair of intertwined ribbon-like strips that begin just behind her nose and seeming to continue to the end of her tail. If there is a break in the pattern, it is hidden by her clothing. Her eyes are also unusual, being a rather startling green, and having most unusual slitted pupils, like some cats, rather than the round pupils of most furs.

Mr. Hansen, whose first name is Lars, is the sole hybrid on the board, a wolverine/black bear cross who is physically intimidating but seems to be gentle-natured. The fact that he would have another hybrid working for him is neither surprising nor worrying. It's doubtful that any other fur at HSE would have hired this femme, given her obviously hybrid nature.

“What can you tell about yourself and your skills?” Lynne asks.

“Well, I recently received my MBA, and was hired here not too long after that. I like working for Mr. Hansen. He's a good fur, and frankly, I was rather surprised to be hired here.”

“Why's that?”

Veronica hesitates a moment. “I'm not sure you're aware of how hybrids are considered in Boston, Lynne.”

“I'm well aware that Boston is a hive of purists, Veronica, and that HSE has been considered to be a bastion of purity. That changed when Mrs. Smythe committed suicide.”

“Oh? I knew that the former owner had died in jail, I didn't know it was a suicide.”

“It was. She hung herself with her bedsheet. If that hasn't been disseminated here, I would appreciate your discretion on the subject.”

“I understand,” Veronica answers, recognizing the test for what it is.

“Good. Mrs. Coona, obviously, is a skunk. Mr. Coona is a raccoon, and they have twins, about six weeks old. Knowing that, now give me your opinion on Mrs. Coona's attitude towards purists.”

Veronica sits back in her chair, eyes wide, stunned by this revelation.

“Oh,” she mutters. “Oh, my. That's hard to believe, Lynne, it really is. Mrs. Smythe's attitude was very well known here, and adhered to by almost everyone. It's one of the reasons Mr. Hansen has

been shuffled off like he has.”

Lynne sits quietly, waiting for more.

After another moment of thought, Veronica continues, “That's really going to change things around here. I think a good number of furs will resign, based on that information alone. The Board is going to go absolutely crazy when they find out. Mr. Hansen will be overjoyed, as am I, and Mr. Jackson and Ms. Vulpes will be pleased, none of them are purists. The rest of the Board is, and they will fight tooth and nail to keep her out. As to your question, I would say that Mrs. Coona has no use for purists, at best, and would happily hang them, at worst.”

Lynne grins, a predator's grin. “You got her attitude just about perfect. But the Board is helpless. She owns a super-majority of stock and can fire the entire Board based on that alone. Besides, every single one of them, except for the three you named, is going to be far too busy with other matters to worry about Mrs. Coona or her family.”

“Oh?” Veronica asks quizzically, her eyebrows raised.

“Oh, yes. Mrs. Coona knows a lot about the Board, more than any of them realize. A complete financial audit started yesterday morning, shortly before we arrived. The audit company came in and simply confiscated all of the books and computer records. They're not just looking for irregularities; it's also a criminal investigation.”

Veronica grins, a definitively feral grin. “Good. Very, very good. That's needed doing for a long time. I really hope you got a firm from out of state. Otherwise you won't find a thing.”

“The audit firm is from Houston, although they do have a small office locally, which is why, in a legal sense, they can do it. All of the auditors, though, are out of the Houston office. Mrs. Coona and Mr. Leonis vetted them quite thoroughly before they were hired.”

“Do they need some help? I haven't been here that long, but I do know where a couple of the bodies are buried, and I have hints on more than a few others.” is the eager reply.

“Why don't we go see?” Lynne responds, gesturing toward the door.

###

“Phil, do you have a moment?” Lynne asks, as she leads Veronica into his office.

“Sure, Lynne,” the lion answers, laying aside the report he was reading.

“This is Veronica Dae Wynn, Phil,” she says, introducing the femme. “She's been assigned to assist us.”

“Veronica, this is Phillip Leonis, our boss. He prefers to be called Phil.”

“That's right, Veronica. Call me Phillip and I'll try out my claws. Mr. Leonis is reserved for use in court.”

“Thank you, Phil, it's nice to meet you.”

Lynne verbally steps back in. “She's already proven to be a gold mine, Phil. She led our auditors straight to a half dozen irregularities, if you want to call them something that mild. The lead auditor wanted to kidnap her on the spot.”

Regarding Veronica more closely, Phil asks Lynne, without looking her way, “And why didn't you let him?”

“Because I think she'll be even more valuable to us. She's well plugged into the internal grapevine, for self-preservation I think, and she can keep us out of all sorts of blind alleys and traps. Also, I like her.”

Phil's eyebrows rise. Lynne isn't usually that forward with such comments, and he has learned to pay attention to them when they occur. “And ...” he coaxes.

“Well, one of the first things she told me, while I was interviewing her, confirmed our initial evaluation of who the honest board members are, right down the line.”

“Very good,” Phil beams, bestowing an appreciative look on Veronica. “Do you want to work with us?” he asks. “Just so you know, we're doing two things here. The first is looking for any criminal or indictable activity. The second is preparing HSE to move to Seattle. We're planning on informing the Board of that, tomorrow, so your discretion until then will be appreciated.”

“I understand, Phil. I will be honored to work with you. I didn't realize Mrs. Coona would be moving the firm, but it makes sense since that's where she lives. I think I would like to go, too, if I may. I will think about it and let you have my firm decision tomorrow, but my initial reaction is to go.”

“Great. Lynne, take a seat, please. You, too, Veronica. I'm going to pick your brain for a bit, so I have a better idea of what's going on around here, while Lynne takes notes. Now, what do you know about ...”

###

That evening, Veronica and Lynne have stopped at a ubiquitous national coffee shop chain for a break, and are enjoying their iced drinks.

“Phil certainly can be intense, can't he,” Veronica observes as she relaxes in her chair.

“Oh, he can,” Lynne agrees, leaning back in her chair as she relaxes. “He's even worse when he's in court, if you can believe it.”

“I guess I'm just glad I'm not on the stand, then,” Veronica says with an exaggerated grin.

Lynne grins back. “That's a good thing. I'm really having fun this evening, too.”

“I thought you'd enjoy a shopping trip, and since I know my way around Boston and you don't, I figured why not? Besides, this way we can get to know each other better off the job.”

“Thank you. I'll return the favor when we get back to Seattle.”

“I'm looking forward to it, Lynne,” Veronica says as she finishes her drink. Getting up, she asks, “Ready for more?”

Finishing her own drink, Lynne gets up, too. “You bet. Not too much more, though. I do need to get back to the hotel and get some sleep, and I really don't want to have to buy a new set of luggage just to go home,” she adds with a giggle.

“And why not?” Veronica asks haughtily, before giggling in return.

###

Gwen and Rick take their seats quietly in the front pew, waiting for the funeral service to begin. They have finally finished greeting the other mourners, many of whom were surprised, and some were shocked, by their inter-species marriage. They are both quite thankful that there are only fifty or so furs attending, so the receiving line did not last long.

He leans over, and asks, in a low tone, “How did she manage to get a Catholic funeral when she committed suicide?”

“The Cardinal gave special dispensation, and she will be buried in the Catholic cemetery, as well,” she whispers back, thinking about her meeting with him. He had promised, fervently, that there would be no problems at the funeral. “I don't know how she can even be considered a Christian, to say nothing of a Catholic, but that's the way things work, here. On the other paw, I doubt that they would have even considered marrying the two of us.”

“How long is this thing going to last?”

“Too long. I'm going to head down to the nursery fairly soon, the twins are going to need feeding and changing. You will have to stay here and represent me and the family.”

“Oh, joy,” Rick responds, hiding a grimace.

“It'll be over soon enough, Love, and the Cardinal knows I'll be leaving just before the services start, and why. Even if they would behave themselves, I won't expose the twins to the incense they'll be using. And they're going to use a lot of it, they always do. Hopefully it won't bother you too much.”

“I'll survive,” he tells her. “I'm not going to enjoy it, but I'll survive.”

“Thank you, Love,” Gwen replies, with a quick kiss to the side of his muzzle. “I think you'll be able to go back to the hotel with the twins after the service. I'll go to the burial by myself.”

Later, at the graveside, Gwen is thankful that the Cardinal has kept that portion of the services as brief as he can, without slighting Catholic tradition. The mourners who have come to the burial seem surprised by that, but Gwen doesn't care. She just wants this to be over and done.

As soon as the services are complete, she steps up to the Cardinal, thanks him, and departs in her limo, leaving the other mourners shocked by her abrupt disappearance.

###

Kass lets himself into the condo. Kel isn't home yet, he knows, her car isn't in the parking lot. He isn't surprised, he is home early today. The repairs on the new building are going well, and the cleaning crew has already started on the upper floors, the barracks that the trainees will be using. He thinks they're jumping the gun, the paint crew is likely to leave some mess behind, but if that happens, he'll just be calling them back.

Checking the pantry and the refrigerator, he starts gathering ingredients for an early supper. He has other plans for later in the evening, and he doubts that Kel will object.

As he starts preparing the meal, his thoughts wander back over the day.

The staff for the school has started arriving, and the first one he met was his new Executive

Officer, Commander Philip “Blackie” Hernandez, a melanistic jaguar, and his wife, Juanita. Blackie is also a SEAL, and while he hasn't worked with him, Kass has reviewed his records and knows he has a valuable asset in the big cat. Juanita is another jaguar, and seems to be a fine lady, and as he ruminates, he finds that he believes she and Kel will become friends. Which will be a very good thing, Kel is going to need friends among the Navy wives, both for support and to teach her what it is to be a Captain's wife.

Kel is walking into that with open eyes, but she still has no idea what's involved in being a senior officer's wife, and her education in that area is something Kass has been concerned about. Juanita is going to become her main source of information and guidance, and Kass is very thankful that she is there. She has already mentioned giving Kel some hints, once she discovered the upcoming wedding and Kel's total ignorance on being a Navy wife.

“Big Bill” Jackson, a Chief Petty Officer who is scheduled to be the chief instructor for the school was also there. Jeff was very glad to see him, they had been friends for quite a few years, and he had specifically requested that Big Bill be assigned to the school. Big Bill certainly deserved his name, he is a Giant River Otter, a species from South America known for their size, and while Bill isn't large for his species, at 6'5" he is still an imposing figure. His wife, Carol, is a common otter, and the disparity in their stature is something they both make fun of, and have a lot of fun with, even during the short introduction he had.

The headquarters staff has also begun to arrive, and he will meet them tomorrow, and his personal aide, an ensign, is supposed to show up as well, although she has another day before she is actually due. The rest of his training cadre will be arriving over the next three or four days, and it will be a week or more before everyone is settled in and he and Jeff can begin training the cadre.

Paws suddenly curl around his waist, interrupting his train of thought, and he startles badly.

“Hee hee, got ya, sweetie!” he hears in his ear, as a pair of pneumatic breasts impress themselves and their very erect nipples against his back.

Spinning around in her embrace, he hugs Kel tightly. “Yes, you did. But now, who has who?” he asks as he tightens his grip.

Kel snuggles up against him, saying, “I think we have each other, actually. But I like it that way.” She ends by giving him a lick-kiss on his nose. “What's for supper?”

Grinning, he tells her, “Vixen, carefully warmed and served on silk. But we're going to have a snack first.”

She shivers a little as she looks up at him and melts tight against his body. “A big snack, I hope. I'm hungry for some nice, hot snow leopard, too.”

###

Jo-Ann shivers as she scans the basement in William Jackson's home. The large room that takes up over half the basement has been converted into a very realistic and frightening dungeon, and the skeleton she can see hanging on one wall has already been identified as that of a previously unknown victim.

The otherwise mundane objects in the room have been turned to gruesome purpose. A gymnastic pommel horse has become a restraining device and the leather that covers it is deeply stained with blood. It stands in a child's wading pool that has had a fitting and length of hose added so that the

blood will run into a floor drain about eight feet away. The restraints that have been added to the legs are also leather and are crusty with dried blood.

In another area is an “X” frame, another common binding device, and mounted low on the wall near it is a tapered plank, placed on edge with the narrow edge up, and well braced. The mount is height adjustable. There are a pair of eyebolts mounted in the floor beneath it and another on the ceiling above. After contemplating it for a moment, she realizes it is a 'pony' and turns away, the thought of the pain it causes making her shiver.

A short bull whip and several varieties of the infamous 'cat o' nine tails' hang on the wall nearby, where they would be directly in the sight of a victim tied to the horse. All of them are bloodstained and obviously well used. Stepping closer, Jo-Ann verifies what she is seeing. One of the 'cats' actually has the barbs from barbed wire carefully threaded and knotted onto the strands of the whip. Another is loaded with fragments of glass, carefully knotted in. Yet another has knots of a variety she's never seen, but they are obviously designed to inflict pain and draw blood, copiously.

There are many other objects on the walls. Pawcuffs, legcuffs, waist chains, and other restraints used by law enforcement hang in one area. Several types of rope hang in another. Chains. Leather straps, some with buckles. Many types of restraints that come from BDSM, including a full body latex suit with a blinding hood.

On another wall is a selection of hoses, of several types and sizes. Beside them is a strangely bent piece of pipe. As she eyes it quizzically, one of the CSI furs tells her, “It's lead. When you hit someone with it, it bends around their body and they will feel the full length of it, rather than just a small area like a rigid pipe. It's also less likely to break bones, but it causes bruises like you wouldn't believe.”

Shuddering at the thought, Jo-Ann steps back from that area, and turns her attention to the cabinets along the last wall. While less obvious than the other displays, these are probably the worst items in the entire house. Jackson has gathered medical equipment and turned it to torture. One item that she recognizes is a defibrillator. The paddles have been replaced with some vicious looking toothed clamps, with strong springs, that would cause severe pain just by their application. Then, to have the power of a defibrillator passed through them ... the victim's body would convulse, causing excruciating pain and conceivably even breaking its own bones, depending where the clamps were attached.

There are IV bottles and stands, numerous surgical instruments, sponges, gloves, other items she doesn't recognize. A few she does recognize, they are commonly used by gynecologists for pelvic exams, although all of them have been altered in ways meant to cause pain and draw blood.

Turning away, Jo-Ann stumbles toward the stairs, looking down to avoid seeing the wall displays again, and she discovers the blood-stained concrete floor. Gasping, her stumbling turns into a staggering run as she tries to escape the horror.

As she mounts the stairs, returning to a world of normalcy, she shudders at the thought of being trapped down there by the madfur that created such a place.

At the top of the stairs, medical personnel and counselors are waiting, and she is quickly guided into one of the debriefing rooms, where she is greeted by a handsome and sympathetic skunk in medical whites, and two furs in suits.

Nearly three hours later, she emerges from the room and moves numbly through the house,

heading for her car, when she hears her name called. Looking back, she sees Annette emerging from another room, looking as shaken as she feels. She waits for the spotted skunkette to join her, then the two of them move outside, rejoining the mundane world where the horrors they have just seen are unimaginable.

Outside, they stop at Annette's car, and join in a hug of mutual support. Giving and sharing their strength, they wordlessly reassure each other that what they have seen is not going to follow them, and they will be able to leave it behind. They reach a mutual decision to take the rest of the day off, neither remembering that they were ordered to do so, and they head for the vacant CCN and its hot tub, Jo-Ann leading the way.

###

“Gwen,” Phil calls in greeting, a few days later, when he sees her walking past. “I have someone I'd like you to meet.”

“Sure, Phil,” she replies. “Who is it?”

“Over here,” he says, guiding her over to the desk beside Lynne's.

“Gwen, this is Veronica Dae Wynn, a staffer here who's been assigned to assist us. She's been an absolute gold mine of information and an invaluable asset,” Phil says as he introduces the femmes.

“Veronica, this is Gwen Coona.”

Veronica stands and shakes paws with Gwen. “It's very good to meet you, ma'am, I've heard a lot of good things about you.”

Gwen takes Veronica's paw in both of hers. “First, I'm Gwen, or Mrs. Coona if you want to be formal. I am not 'ma'am'. And knowing these two, what you've heard is undoubtedly exaggerated.”

Veronica smiles at the friendly, and beautiful, skunkette. “Somehow, I doubt that, Gwen. I've been hearing the same thing through the grapevine. You only come down on those furs that deserve it. The only complainers I've heard of, other than the ones hurting, are their cronies and the other purists.” The last word has a particular subtle emphasis that Gwen hears, and feels.

Gesturing for Veronica to sit down, and sitting down herself, Gwen quietly asks, “Why do you hate purists so much?”

Startled, Veronica looks at Gwen, her eyes wide.

“Veronica, I both heard and felt a good bit of hatred when you said that word, and I really would like to know why. Part of it is curiosity, both professional and personal, part of it is the fact that I feel much the same way, although not as strongly, and part of it is a desire to comfort you, although I'm not quite sure why I feel that way.”

Veronica, surprised and mildly shocked at Gwen's statement, takes a moment to look into her eyes, and sees only compassion and concern. “Gwen,” she says quietly, “my parents were murdered by purists when I was five years old. I barely remember them at all. I was raised by foster parents, and they are my family, in every way that counts. The only real legacy I have from my birth parents is a trust fund and a court settlement from their murder.”

Gwen hesitates, then gathers her into a hug, making sure that she is willing before wrapping her

up. "Oh, sweetie," she whispers, "I am so very, very sorry. I hope I didn't upset you with my question."

Veronica whispers back, "No, you haven't. But thank you. Very few people have ever reacted the way you have." Tightening the hug briefly, Veronica then releases Gwen, and both of them sit back in their chairs, and proceed to get better acquainted.

A bit later, Veronica is saying, "... and I'm going to be moving to Seattle when the company moves. I'm really looking forward to that."

"And we will be very glad to have you, Veronica. I will make sure there's a place for you when you arrive. Are you going to need any financial assistance with moving?" Gwen asks.

"I can handle it, Gwen, although I will also be honest and tell you that any assistance you offer will also be gladly accepted. I may have some money, but I'm not exactly rich."

"Don't worry about it, then. I'll make sure your name is on the list. Now, I've got to scoot, I've got a lot to get done today."

"Thanks, Gwen. If I don't see you before then, I look forward to seeing you in Seattle."

Gwen smiles in return, before she heads into Phil's office.

Sitting down, she waits for him to finish the paperwork in his paws. Once he's finished, she asks, "Phil, what do you think of Veronica?"

"She's a treasure. She's been a fantastic asset here, so far, and I think she will be in Seattle, as well. Why?"

"I'd like you to evaluate her as an executive secretary. Specifically for me."

"Oh," he replies. "I was about half hoping to recruit her myself."

Gwen grins at him. "Oh, no, you don't. You already have Lynne, you don't need two furs of that caliber. I take it that means you'd recommend her right now?"

Phil grins wryly. "You caught me. And yes. If you want to make the offer right now, I would be completely in favor of it, and I think you will treasure her as much as I do, in short order. When do you want her moving?"

"With the first group, of course, if not sooner. If she's going to be my secretary, she's going to have to step up to the plate. Her first task will be setting up and organizing the new offices. She already knows a lot of the furs, she has a handle on what's going on, and if she can handle being in charge of setting up the new office, and does a good job, then she'll be a great fit as my secretary."

Phil looks at Gwen with a question in his eyes. "Do you want to tell her, or should I?"

Gwen looks thoughtful for a moment. "I think it'd be better if you did, actually. Also let her know what her duties are going to be. Let her know that if she feels she can't handle the office set-up, that's okay, she'll still have a job with us. But in that case, I'll also need to find an executive secretary who can handle it."

"Will do, Gwen. I don't think she'll even hesitate, and I'm certain she'll do very well. I'm going to have to find a couple of furs to replace her, though. I'm not going to count on finding anyone else as

skilled and knowledgeable as she is.”

“Then ask her, Phil. She'll know who to recommend, if any fur does.”

Phil grimaces. “You're right, as usual. Thanks, Gwen.”

###

The next morning, Gwen is in her office, leaning back in her chair and tapping her teeth with a pen as she contemplates the upcoming day. She is interrupted by a knock at the door. Sitting up and placing the pen on the desk, she calls, “Come in.”

Veronica comes in and closes the door, then seats herself in front of the desk. After carefully positioning her tail and smoothing her skirt, she looks at Gwen and an impudent grin appears on her muzzle.

“Executive secretary, huh?”

Gwen smiles broadly in return. “Yep. Want the job?”

“I'm here, aren't I?” Veronica quips.

Gwen laughs delightedly. “Oh, we're going to be a pair, aren't we?”

“So what's on the schedule today, Boss?”

“Just a few little chores. Firing the Board, moving the company, landing on the moon. You know, just minor stuff.”

Veronica looks at Gwen, her jaw dropping. “Ooh, you have a wicked sense of humor, Boss. Just little stuff, huh?”

“Yeah, we'll save the big jobs for tomorrow.”

Veronica laughs at the sally. “Okay, let me go get a pad and some pens, and we'll get your day organized.”

Re-entering the office a few minutes later, she finds Gwen in her previous position, leaning back in her chair and tapping her teeth with a pen. She takes a seat and arranges herself, and waits for Gwen to start.

After a moment, Gwen lowers the pen. “Let's get started,” she says, sighing.

“I have had interviews with every member of the Board,” she starts. “Hansen, Vulpes, Jackson will be staying on, and all three have started their preparations to move to Seattle. I am a little surprised that not one member of any of their staffs wants to stay in Boston. However, that is a pleasant surprise. I have set up a relocation fund for any non-Board member who needs assistance. That includes you, Veronica. The members of the Board are assumed to have the financial wherewithal to move themselves and their families.”

Pausing for a moment, Gwen gathers her thoughts. “The rest of the Board have either tendered their resignations or have been ordered to do so. At the moment, only two are resisting this, and they have been surprised at the lack of support they're getting.”

“Let me guess,” Veronica offers. At Gwen's nod, she continues, “Harold Hendrikson and David Pearsoll.”

“Got it in one,” Gwen confirms. “The two dumbest members of the Board. Who else could it be?”

“Do you need any ammo to use on them?” Veronica asks.

“I've got pretty complete dossiers already, but what do you have?”

“Hendrikson keeps a little harem in his office, and he manages to be discreet, at least for him. One of them is Pearsoll's niece. At least two of the others are there because they've been blackmailed into submission. Pearsoll gambles and loses. He's been dipping into the discretionary funds to cover his losses.”

“What about Amy Pearsoll?”

“She's a slut and thinks sleeping with the boss is the best way to move up in the company.”

“That was my read, as well, Veronica. Thank you for confirming our findings. We didn't know about the blackmail, though. Can you give me those two names, please?”

“Susan Blackstone and Cindy Clarkson.”

“Are they competent otherwise?”

“Susan could be a competent secretary in a better environment, but she'll need some guidance to get her self-confidence back. Cindy has the potential to be a decent manager, with the same qualification.”

“Do either of them have anything holding them here in Boston?”

“Not that I'm aware of, Boss.”

“Hendrikson will crumble when I face him with the blackmail and sexual harassment charges, and we're already aware of Pearsoll's embezzlement. They'll both be gone by the end of the day. As will the rest of the Board, except for those two, they're cleaning out their offices as we speak, with security watching them, and cameras in plain sight.”

“We have our initial charges ready to file against all of them, and there should be a lot more as we get through the audit. Embezzlement, fraud, theft, blackmail, you name it. We also have a fair bit of evidence against the state attorney general that we'll be using. Since almost all of this involves interstate commerce, we are filing the charges in federal court, citing the political influence involved as justification for the change of venue on the remaining charges. Initial charges will be presented in about two weeks.”

“I'm really happy to hear this, Boss. It's needed doing for a long time.”

“I'm well aware of that, Veronica. My mother was more than a little involved herself. She was a major contributor to the Brethren, which I didn't know, or I would have been pursuing this a long time ago. And yes, I'm aware that the Brethren were the ones that murdered your parents and tried to kill you.”

Veronica is sitting motionless, with traces of tears showing in her eyes.

Gwen comes around her desk and crouches down in front of Veronica, taking her paws. “That was before she was supporting them, hon,” Gwen consoles her. “She may have been aware of it; her father was also one of their major supporters, and probably a member. But she only started supporting them when her father died. Since she was a greedy bitch, she used company funds for that, not her personal fortune.”

“Just so you know,” Gwen adds, “I’m adding the company to the lawsuit against the Brethren, in an attempt to recover some of those funds. My husband and I were among those that the Brethren directly attacked in Seattle, and my husband is one of the leaders in the charges against them. A very good friend of ours is another of the leaders. Our goal is to completely bankrupt the Brethren and put them out of business.”

Veronica draws a shaky breath, the tears welling close to the surface.

Seeing this, Gwen draws her to her feet and guides her over to the sofa, before sitting her down and joining her.

“Veronica, let it out, hon,” she softly urges, offering a hug.

Accepting the hug, Veronica buries her face against Gwen and lets the tears start. Gwen just settles back on the sofa and holds her gently. A bit later, she feels the tears diminish, then stop, but she continues to hold Veronica since she shows no sign of pulling back.

A few minutes later, Veronica gently disengages herself, sniffing. “I’m sorry, Gwen,” she begins, before being shushed.

“Nonsense. You needed to let that out, and I’ll bet you feel a lot better now. I don’t mind in the least. I support my employees, Veronica, and this definitely falls under that. It’s just a bit more personal than most of them are going to get.”

“Now, there’s a powder room over behind that door. Go clean yourself up, then get your purse and fix your face, and we’ll get back to work.”

Willing back another rush of tears, Veronica thanks Gwen and follows her directions. Looking in the mirror as she washes up, she asks herself, “*How did I ever get so lucky?*”

###

Gwen, Phil, and Peter Hollister, the raccoon attorney Phil has hired, are ushered into the office of Henry van Housen, Esmerelda Smythe’s lawyer.

“Welcome, welcome. I know we are here for a somber occasion, but there is no need for gloomy faces,” the plump fox says, completely failing to notice the expressions of his visitors.

Gwen interrupts his homily, “Thank you, sir. Shall we get on with the reading? I don’t have a great deal of time to spend on this.”

Harrumphing, the old attorney returns to his desk and settles himself, taking his time.

Recognizing the behavior, Gwen and the others simply settle themselves and wait for him to ready himself. It is obvious that he won’t be rushed.

After a couple of minutes, and realizing that he has failed to impress his visitors, he starts reading the will. The provisions in it are no surprise, but Gwen is still determined to receive her due.

“Very well,” Gwen says after he finishes. “We will be petitioning the court to vacate this will. Most of the provisions that have been made are in violation of other, older, and binding agreements, that have been found valid in previous hearings. The retirement of the family butler is acceptable to me, but the terms of his retirement are not. Mr. Hollister will be in contact with you about these proceedings, and will be acting under the direction of Mr. Leonis, my attorney.”

Van Housen, looking as though he has bitten into a particularly sour lemon, accedes, and after accepting Peter's contact information, he escorts them to the door.

As they drive away in the limo, Gwen heaves a sigh of relief.

“Am I glad that's over, Phil. You and Peter will have to deal with him about the will and the disposition of the estate. Just be aware that he is a purist through and through, and he is known for being willing to do almost anything if the price is right. Shifty, sneaky, and he ought to be a weasel, not a fox.”

Peter smiles as he relaxes. “I've dealt with him before, and I will enjoy taking him to the cleaners on this. I will guarantee that his fees are highly exorbitant and the court will probably agree with me that they should be seriously reduced. I've accomplished that before.”

Gwen smiles. “That's excellent, Peter. Leaving her only child out of her will is a lever we can use to break it, especially with the specious arguments she used. A homunculus? Give me a break. On the other paw, Henry's retirement, like I said, is acceptable, but the payments should be about 25% higher. The other servants need to be let go, with a typical severance package. I visited the estate a couple days ago, and Phil has a list of the few items I wish to keep, all of which are in my father's den. Everything else in or on the estate needs to be sold or auctioned. The estate itself will also be sold, but I expect that a normal real estate listing should accomplish that.”

“I want you and Phil to handle this if at all possible. I can return to Boston if there is a real need, but with newborn twins I would really prefer not to.”

“Very well, Mrs. Coona,” Peter replies. “I'm sure Phil will have all the information I'll need to handle this. It will probably be desirable to keep some of the furnishings in the mansion, as they will increase the desirability of the property. If the buyer doesn't want them, they can be dealt with at that time.”

###

Gwen and Rick settle into the seats on their charter flight, happy to be returning to Seattle. The twins are settled and ready for sleep, with their EarPlanes already fitted.

Snuggling up with Rick, Gwen relaxes and gives him a loving kiss. “I am glad that's over. With any luck, I'll never see Boston again.”

Rick smiles at his wife, “You and me both. This has been an adventure for me, and I enjoyed seeing Boston, but I have to agree with you, I have no desire to return.”

“Mmmm,” Gwen mурrs, as she settles in for the flight.

###

When they deplane, Gwen and Rick are greeted by Mike and Cassy, who have brought the Rolls to pick them up.

“Where's Kass?” Rick asks.

“Work,” Mike replies. “And when are you coming back? I miss you, and so does everyone else.”

“Tomorrow, Mike,” Rick replies with a grin, as he hands little Kacey over to Cassy, letting her and Gwen deal with the twins.

“How was the flight?”

“Long and boring. Although flying charter has it all over a commercial flight. Everything about it is better, except for the price.”

“How about the twins? Kits usually have a lot of problems.”

“Kass gave us a couple sets of EarPlanes. They worked like a charm, never a peep out of either of them. I will have to remember to thank him for those. Wouldn't hurt you to keep a pair or two around yourself.”

Cassy walks up in time to hear this last exchange. “What are EarPlanes?”

Gwen, who is beside her, answers, “Special ear plugs that slow down the pressure change, they work great. Kass is going to get a big kiss for those.”

Cassy giggles. “I'll bet that's not all he's going to get!”

Gwen, her green eyes a-twinkle with mischief, winks. “We'll see. Kel will probably have something to say about what happens.”

With that, the happy foursome, plus kits and luggage, depart for home.