

Sam

A Tale From the Mystic Wolf

By A. Sigurd Olson

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Author's warning:

This story contains foul language, and may make some readers uncomfortable, however I feel that in order to portray the characters properly that the swearing is necessary. I am dealing with teenagers here and in the situation I have them in they do swear a lot. I have personally been in the situation they're in so I'm speaking from experience.

Part 1

February 2002

Brisbane shut the door to The Mystic Wolf and locked it, the night air was chilly at three in the morning but it made no never mind to the massive wolf. It had been a busy night at the bar and he was glad to be heading home. He started his relatively short walk home. He lived less than a mile from the bar so why drive unless it was pouring rain, and even then he was likely to walk. There was plenty of snow on the ground, much of it still white from the storm the night before, though the stuff in the road had turned dirt brown long ago. The giant of a wolf soon found himself lost in his own thoughts as he strolled up the familiar path.

“Hey mister, wanna party?” The small voice startled Brisbane out of his thoughts and stopped him in mid step; he looked down and saw a waif of a raccoon dressed like a streetwalker. She was obviously freezing her tail off, hugging herself in a vain attempt to stay warm.

“Aren't you in the wrong city for this type of work? Minneapolis is west of here.” Brisbane wondered why she was trying to work the trade in St. Paul, which wasn't really known for having prostitutes, unlike its sister city which had them all over the warehouse district. “Anyway you're way too young to be my type. Why don't you run along home, your parents would be furious if they knew you were out here trying to pick up strangers.”

“My mother doesn't care; she's high all the time. Anyways I ran away from home over a year ago. Look if you don't wanna screw me could you at least give me some money so I can get something to eat?”

“When was the last time you ate?” Brisbane hated to hear a sob story, the raccoon couldn’t have been fifteen.

“Yesterday.”

He knew immediately that it was a lie; she probably had gone a couple of days with out anything that counted as real food in her stomach.

“Tell ya what young one, I’ve got a spare bedroom in my condo, you can sleep there and I’ll make you something to eat.” There was no way he was going to let her spend the rest of the night wandering the street, she was cold enough as it was, he didn’t want to leave her to freeze to death.

“How do I know I can trust you?”

“I guess you can’t, but you were the one who tried picking me up, so you were already willing to take a chance. Anyways I’m taking just as big of a chance that you might try stealing me blind while I sleep.”

“I don’t steal,” her tone was defiant, she had done a lot of stupid things but stealing had yet to be one of them.

“Okay then. Do you want to risk staying a night at my place?”

“Sure.”

“Then it’s settled. Here,” Brisbane took off his coat and gave it to the raccoon; it was enormous on her which wasn’t surprising since there was over a two foot height difference between them. “Now grab your stuff and let’s go.”

The raccoon reached down and picked up a small duffel bag and tried slinging it over her shoulder. The oversized coat got in the way and she settled on carrying it in her paw instead. “What’s your name mister?”

“I’m Brisbane. And what can I call you?”

“Anybody that knows me calls me Sam. Really it’s Samantha but...” Her voice trailed off not wanting to talk about anything really personal.

“Well Sam I live about three-quarters of a mile away, can you walk that far in those shoes?” He pointed towards the stilettos the girl was wearing.

“I guess I can, but it’s going to hurt.”

Brisbane reached down and scooped her up. To him she weighed practically nothing. Sam started to protest but realized that this was far more comfortable. Most of the men in her life had been creeps, low lifes, perverts, or worse. But here was a guy who had given her his coat so she didn’t freeze and was carrying her so she didn’t hurt her feet from walking too far in uncomfortable shoes. And then there was the promise of a bed and a home cooked meal. Either this guy was putting up a show he didn’t need to get to her, or he was really just a nice guy. Maybe she’d try to stick with him for a few days if he’d let her. She nuzzled up against Brisbane and half dozed off from the rhythm of the walk to his place.

After about thirty minutes Brisbane stopped and put Sam down in front of the main entry to a large condo building. “Could you get my keys out? They’re in the left hand pocket.”

Sam fetched the keys out of the pocket and gave them over. Brisbane swiped an electronic key past a sensor and opened the door for Sam. “This way.” He led her down a hall to his condo. He opened the door, switched on the lights, and motioned for her to enter ahead of him.

The condo wasn’t large but it wasn’t small either. It wasn’t super clean but it was comfortable. “Have a seat on the couch, and I’ll make us some dinner. Do you like steak?”

Sam couldn’t believe her ears. “I haven’t had one in a long time, but I’d love it.” She mostly ate fast food with the occasional dumpster dive when she was really desperate. Now she was going to get real food.

Sam curled up on the couch and finding the remote to the TV she turned it on and started channel surfing. She then looked down at herself and realized she was still wearing her ‘working clothes’. “Do you mind if I take a quick shower and get changed?”

“Go ahead, the bathroom’s on the left.” Brisbane answered as he made a small salad.

When Sam got to the bathroom she saw that it was pretty much spotless. She started the water and once she got it to a good temperature she quickly stripped and got into the shower. She knew with confidence that Brisbane wouldn’t think of peeking in on her while she showered. He was kind and gentle, maybe she could settle down with him.

Once she had cleaned away a few days worth of grime she got out of the shower, toweled off, and got into her regular clothes. They were worn and loose but they were comfortable. When she opened the bathroom door the first thing she noticed was the smell of food. Her mouth watered, 'real food, and I don't have to turn a trick to get it.'

She went into the kitchen where Brisbane was using an electric grill to cook a couple of thick steaks. "Hey there kiddo. There's a salad on the table for you, why don't you start on that."

Sam sat down and not only was there a salad but a large glass of milk, she was in heaven. Sam devoured the salad with the abandon of a starving girl. A minute later Brisbane put a fairly large, juicy steak in front of her. There was seasoning salt and steak sauce already on the table. She grabbed the sauce and poured a pool of it on one side of the plate. She ate the steak slower than the salad savoring every bite. She had never eaten this well in all her life. Even when her mother had had the money for a treat like a steak they were always tough and thin. This steak however was thick and so soft she could practically cut it with her fork.

Soon enough Brisbane sat down across from Sam with a much larger steak. He looked at the expression on Sam's face. "Been a while has it?"

"I've never had food as good as this!" Sam exclaimed. "Do you eat like this all the time?"

"Most of the time I do." Brisbane waited for her to finish eating before asking her his first question. "So why did you run away."

Sam's face hardened. "Why do you want to know?"

"Look Sam I want to help you and in order to do that I need to know a little more about you. So why?"

Sam sighed and looked at her plate. "My mother is a crack head and a prostitute. She was screwing a couple of different guys a night just to keep up with her addiction. I was usually able to swipe enough money away from her to get food. It was when she let a customer use me that I decided to run away. Can you imagine losing your virginity that way?" Sam was startled when she realized that Brisbane was growling in a way that could only be described as angry. The look on his face was one of pure rage. She was terrified.

When Brisbane saw the look on Sam's face change to one of fright he quickly realized what he had been doing and snapped out of it. "I'm sorry kid, I'm just angry at what happened to you. Please keep going."

"Well I ran away, I was thirteen. I started off begging and staying in shelters. When a couple of guys at the shelter cornered me I decided they weren't safe anymore, even though the volunteers kicked them out. I started sleeping in abandoned houses and doorways. When begging didn't pay I found some sluttier clothing and started turning tricks. I've been beaten up, robbed, and came damn close to being raped on several occasions." Brisbane had started growling again, but this time she ignored it. "That's what led me to you. There isn't much crime here and I thought I'd be fairly safe for a night. I was just walking around to keep from freezing when I ran into you."

Brisbane nodded, he was enraged. He wanted to find every last bastard that had hurt this kid and rip them apart slowly, very slowly. "Why didn't you go to the police and get into the child welfare system?"

Sam sighed heavily, what Brisbane had just said showed his naiveté of her world. "Early on I met a couple of kids who had been in the system; I've heard the horror stories."

"Okay I'm going to let you stay here for a couple of days, but I'm going to have to contact child welfare." Sam looked like she was about to protest but Brisbane held up a paw to stop her. "I'll also give you my phone numbers; you can come to me if you ever need help. I don't want you back on the streets."

Sam looked down at her plate. "I can live with that," she finally said.

Brisbane sighed there was something about Sam he was going to have to ask but he knew she wouldn't like. "Where's your stash Sam?"

Sam looked at him surprised. "What are you talking about?"

Brisbane shook his head slowly. "Sam I smelled it on you when I picked you up. You've been smoking marijuana. So where's your stash?"

Sam dropped her head. "It's in my bag."

"Bring it over and dump it out so I can make sure you don't have anything else. Look I don't care about the fact that you've been using marijuana, I'd like to see it legalized, but for now it's still illegal. So dump your bag."

Sam looked deflated she didn't want to give up her stash but she wanted to stay with her new friend. Right now he was more important to her than getting stoned and she could always get more. She brought over her bag from the living room and dumped the contents out on the table. Everything she owned in the world was now in a pile on the dining room table. It was a pathetically small pile.

Brisbane poked around her possessions. He quickly found her bag of marijuana, seven joints. He picked up the bag and looked at her. "Why?" Was all he said.

"It helps get me through the week. A joint a day keeps the pain away." She said with a small, fake smile.

"Doesn't help much does it." It was a statement not a question.

"No," Sam admitted, "but every time I light one up I hope that this time it'll be different. Has yet to take much more then the edge off, it still hurts."

Brisbane went back to searching through her stuff. He quickly found her other set of 'working' clothes.

"Why do you have a St. Christopher's Academy uniform?" He asked picking up the black uniform with purple accents.

"One of the priests likes to pretend he's fucking one of his students." Sam said ashamedly. "He gave it to me to help his imagination. I meet him every Friday around ten. He gives me enough cash to keep me off the street for a couple of days. Also I often get a few John's who like the school girl look."

Brisbane smiled to himself, he had an idea of how to make the bastard face justice that couldn't be provided by the law. "I have some friends who will make that hypocrite pay for what he's been doing."

"He's not so bad." Sam said half-heartedly. "I've been through a lot worse."

"Yeah," Brisbane said with an evil smile, "but my friends are always looking for a good reason to bring vengeance to any Christian faith. As for the rest that have hurt you, they'll all pay in one way or other in time."

Brisbane poked through the pile of Sam's belongings for a few more minutes, and didn't find anything else of interest. It was depressing that there was so little there, he would change that.

“O.K. then, it’s time for bed kiddo.” Brisbane got up and led Sam to the guest room. The room had a twin bed in it with clean sheets which was more than Sam had ever seen.

She looked up at him. “Why are you doing all this for me?”

“Because I’m a nice guy. I don’t need anymore reason than that do I.”

Sam stared at him. “In my world there has always been a catch.”

“Well then it’s time to introduce you to my world.” Brisbane ruffled Sam’s hair. “Good night kiddo. I’ll see you in the morning.”

It took Sam a few seconds to figure out where she was when she woke up. Then she remembered Brisbane and how nice he had been to her. The next thing she realized was that she smelled coffee. She didn’t particularly like coffee but it meant that Brisbane was probably up and ready to cook breakfast. She got dressed and headed into the hall.

Sam could hear Brisbane humming to himself from the kitchen and then heard the whirring of a mixer. “What’s for breakfast?” She asked in way of announcing herself.

“Good morning to you too.” Brisbane answered without turning around. “I thought we’d have pancakes.”

“Sounds good to me. I haven’t had real pancakes in years.” Sam sat down at the table and waited patiently for breakfast to be served. “So what are we going to do today?”

“Well I made some calls to get people to cover my shifts for a couple of days. Today I’m going to take you shopping for some new clothes. Since what you’re wearing is your only set of non-‘working’ clothes,” Brisbane spat out the word ‘working’ as if it was an unpleasant taste, “we’ll go get you some nice stuff. We’ll also get you a larger duffle bag, not that I want you carrying more stuff around on the street, but you’ll need it when you go to a foster home.”

“Why can’t I just stay with you?” Sam had heard all the horror stories of foster fathers getting too ‘friendly’ with their charges. Then of course there was the possibility of getting stuck with other kids who were just as bad as that. She truthfully felt that she would be better off just staying with Brisbane. He had already proven to her that he could be trusted.

“As much as I would like that, I’d get in major trouble with the law if I kept you. There are procedures that I’d have to follow for you to live with me legally. For starters child welfare has to find your mother and determine if she’s fit to be a parent. From what you tell me she isn’t, so you wouldn’t be going back there. Next I’m not registered as a foster parent. I’d have to jump through a lot of legal hoops to become one. It would be difficult to say the least since I’m a single male, I doubt the system would look to favorably on that.” Brisbane was fairly sure he didn’t want to become a foster parent. True he liked the kid, but to be responsible for her, that was an entirely different matter.

“You did say you’d give me your phone number so I can get in contact with you if I need to, right?” Sam wanted something she had never had in her life before, something stable. She wanted to have Brisbane as a back up if something should go wrong and she needed an escape. On the plus side all she’d have to do if someone got too ‘friendly’ would be to mention him as the hulking giant who had saved her. No sane fur would want to tangle with Brisbane.

“Yes, I’ll give you my number so you can get a hold of me for any reason. If you need me to make a personal appearance to put someone in their place just let me know. Think of me as your personal guardian angel.” Saying so he put two stacks of pancakes on the table quickly followed by butter and pure maple syrup; “Now dig in kiddo.”

After they were done eating, which took a while since there was a lot of batter to go through and Brisbane ate quite a bit, they got ready to go out shopping. "It's pretty cold out there. Will that jacket of yours be enough for you?" He asked referring to the denim jacket that had been in her bag.

“I’ll wear my sweatshirt under. It’s not as warm as I’d like but it’s better than nothing.” Sam hadn’t really owned a warm jacket since she could remember, there was never the money.

“OK then hold on a few minutes I’ll be right back.” Brisbane left the condo and returned five minutes later.

“Where did you go?” Sam asked.

“My SUV has a remote starter, it’ll warm up the car while we wait in here. No point in you freezing in the car.” Brisbane then grabbed a piece of paper off a pad on the fridge door and started jotting down a list. “So kiddo, what do you need?”

“Pretty much everything.”

For the next ten minutes the two of them put together a list of essentials for the young raccoon. Everything from socks and underwear, to a winter jacket was on the list, plus essential toiletries. Brisbane was sure that they had forgotten things but they would remember them as they shopped.

Once enough time had past they left the condo and headed out to the car. It was a large SUV, modified to allow someone of Brisbane’s immense stature to drive it. It had warmed up to a fair degree and while not hot it was pleasant inside. “Hop on in kiddo and we’ll get this shopping done.”

Soon they were headed down the road on a shopping trip for all of Sam's needs. Once they got to the store it finally sunk in for Sam that she wouldn’t be buying at a thrift store, everything would be new. This was going to be a whole new experience for her. She had grown up dirt poor, buying almost everything second hand. Now for the first time in her life she’d get to buy clothes that hadn’t been worn by someone else.

As they wandered through the racks of clothes Sam kept checking the price tags of everything. She wasn’t sure which startled her more, the prices, or the fact that Brisbane just kept telling her to try stuff on and if it fit he just put it in the cart and they kept going. Once they had a few pairs of jeans for her and some nice shirts as well as underwear and the like they paid for everything and left to continue their shopping elsewhere.

The next stop was at the Mall of America. Sam had never been to the Mall before, she just knew that everything there was too expensive for her to have ever afforded. Brisbane led her to a store specializing in leather jackets and got her a nice coat with a removable liner so it was good for every season. Then it was on to a couple of shoe stores where he got her a pair of sneakers and a pair of top quality boots.

While they were at the Mall Sam pulled her unofficial guardian into a store selling plushies. “What do you want to go in there for?” Brisbane asked slightly confused.

“I’ve never had a plush toy, even as a little kid. I want one now that I’m starting a new life.”

For Brisbane it was one more glimpse into Sam’s sad past. ‘No kid should have to go through life with out having at least one plushy,’ he thought. “OK Sam which one do you want?”

Sam looked around very briefly until her eyes fell upon a plush of a white, feral, wolf. “This one,” she said, holding up the toy. “He reminds me of you.”

Brisbane smiled slightly. “Sure thing kiddo.” He reached down and ruffled Sam’s black hair, causing her to squirm away from him, laughing.

Once they were done with all their shopping, they headed up to the food court for a snack. While they were eating Sam thought back on all of their purchases and something shoved its way into her consciousness. Her brain started calculating just how many tricks she’d have had to turn to be able to afford all this. The final total sickened her for two reasons; first the realization just how much she owed Brisbane and the knowledge that she’d probably never be able to repay him. And second the fact that she was actually able to make such a grotesque calculation. At twenty bucks for a blow-job, which was about the going rate, the coat alone would have taken about twenty paying customers. The thought caused her to lose her apatite until she realized something else, Brisbane didn’t want anything back. He was doing this just because he was a nice guy.

“You know I can’t repay you, right?”

Brisbane shook his head. “And you’ll never need to kiddo. I have plenty of money to do this, and I just want to help you out. I’d have just spent it on something else anyways. At least this way it’s going to a good cause. Now let’s get out of here. Why don’t we go home and watch a movie?”

The next day Brisbane called up his cousin, Sigurd. “Hey Sig can you come over I need to talk to you about some things?” He asked once Sigurd had answered the phone.

“Sure. What’s the situation?” Even though Sigurd was eight years younger Brisbane found him to be a good sounding board for important decisions.

“Well it’s sort of hard to explain. It would help if you could come over and see the situation yourself.”

Sigurd mentally shrugged. “Okay, I’ve got nothing better to do today; I’ll be over in half-an-hour.”

Brisbane hung up and started preparing for his cousin’s arrival. There really wasn’t much to be done save for restocking the fridge with sodas. Sigurd would be a good person to help him decide how to proceed with the whole ‘Sam issue’. Sigurd was wise beyond his years, probably came from the hour of meditation he practiced every day.

“Who were you talking to?” Sam asked from the couch.

“My cousin. I need some advice on what to do with you.”

Sam tilted her head. “I thought it was all decided. You were going to give me over to child welfare.”

“I am, but I’m not sure what to do after that.” At the beginning of yesterday he was certain that he was going to paw her over to child welfare and deal with her when ever she called him. By the end of the day he wasn’t so sure. He was growing fond of her; she needed him in away that made him feel special.

After a while there was a page from the front door. It was Sigurd asking to be let in. When Sigurd entered the condo he was just as shocked to see Sam, as Sam was at his tiger-striped appearance.

“Why is there a teenage raccoon sitting on your couch watching TV.” He asked Brisbane in a loud whisper.

“Because it was either that or let her freeze on the street.”

“Okay you better start from the beginning.” Sigurd sat down at the table and waited for his cousin to start talking.

Brisbane launched into the story of how he had found Sam and had taken her in. Then he told him about what had happened to the girl from before she ran away to the present. He wasn’t surprised that the tiger-striped wolf’s reaction was a match for his own.

“Who do we kill first?” Sigurd growled.

“You’re not going to hunt anyone down. As much as it would make us both feel better.” Brisbane didn’t want to see his cousin locked up for seeking revenge.

“Okay then. What do we do?”

Brisbane looked down for a few minutes. “Tomorrow I’m contacting child welfare and getting her in the system. I’m going to give her my phone number so she can get a hold of me in case she needs help.”

“That sounds like a good plan. What do you need me for?” Sigurd was puzzled. Brisbane seemed to have figured out what he was going to do with the girl why get him involved.

“Do you mind if we go for a walk?” When Sigurd shook his head Brisbane got up and put on his boots and jacket. “Sam, just stay here and watch TV, we’ll be back in a little bit.”

“Okay.” Sam said turning back to the television.

Brisbane led Sigurd out of the condo and onto the sidewalk. He had a reason for not wanting Sam to over hear what he wanted to talk to Sigurd about.

“Okay Snow Dancer, what don’t you want the kid to hear?”

Brisbane looked up at the sky for a while before answering. “I’m not sure what to do after she enters the system.”

Sigurd was perplexed. “I thought you were going to give her your phone number incase she needed your help? What else is there to do?”

Brisbane let out a slow, deep, breath. “I’m thinking of trying to adopt her.”

“You’re what?!” Sigurd couldn’t believe his ears.

“I’ve started growing fond of the kid; she needs something stable in her life.” Brisbane put himself on the defensive right away.

“You don’t need to be her father to be that something. All you need to do is be her friend, and be there for her when she needs you.” Sigurd was aiming at the logical approach to the situation.

“I know that, but that doesn’t change things. I think I have what it takes to be a good father.” Both Brisbane and Sigurd knew this was an argument between logic and emotion.

“You work nights. You don’t get home until after three in the morning. You’re single. You’re male. Shall I keep listing the strikes against you? There is no way the county is going to let you adopt her.”

“I can at least try to become her foster-father.” Brisbane said in a desperately hopeful tone.

“See above list.” Sigurd’s tone was slightly harsh. “Cousin this isn’t something you should take lightly. Becoming a father would mean a huge change for you. You’d have to change your hours and cut back on how much you’re working for starters.”

“I can do that.”

Sigurd continued. “What about women. This would mean the end to casual dating.”

“I can give up women for a while. I don’t date that much anyway.”

“Okay here’s the real kicker; how do you explain the Mystic Wolf? The people in charge of child welfare are going to want to see where you work as part of a background check. How are you going to explain a place where for twenty bucks you can get a drink that makes you breathe fire?” Sigurd was playing what he hoped was a trump card.

“Simple. I’ll use the same gas on the investigator that I use on the health inspector. They’ll see what I want them to see. They’ll see the place as a busy, respectable bar, nothing more nothing less.” The health inspector never quite remembered all the details of his visits to the place. All he remembered was that everything was as it was supposed to be.

Sigurd wasn’t sure he liked the idea. “That border lines on the unethical.”

“So does not doing thorough background checks on foster-families. She's told me horror stories about what happened to other kids who have been in the system but are now back on the streets. If she goes somewhere else there's no telling what could possibly happen to her.” Brisbane wanted badly to keep Sam safe.

“Just one more question.”

“Yes?”

“What's the real reason behind your wanting to do this?” Sigurd needed to hear this before he'd give Brisbane his support.

Brisbane stopped and sighed heavily. “Because I'm lonely. I have casual flings, not relationships. If I go on a date with the same woman more than twice in a row it's amazing. I want to feel needed, not just by my employees, but by someone really special. Sam is that someone.”

Sigurd looked up at his much taller cousin. “I guess I can see that. Okay you've got my support, lock, stock, and barrel.”

Brisbane smiled broadly. “Thanks Sig. That means a lot to me.”

“Are you going to tell Sam that you're going to try to become her foster parent?”

The white wolf shook his head no. “No sense in getting her hopes up only to have them dashed if I can't.”

“That's understandable; I know you'd hate to do something like that to anyone. Look I'm not sure if it will help any, but if you need it I'll help fund any lawyers you might need.” Sigurd never did anything half way. If he said he was supporting you, you could count on his full support doing whatever was necessary.

Brisbane knew better than to object, he may very well need Sigurd's financial support in this matter. “Thanks cousin, I may very well need that money to hire a good lawyer to argue my case.”

“Well let's get back inside. I'd like a better chance to meet Sam.”

“Okay.” Brisbane led the way back to the condo.

The next day Brisbane made some calls and after a little transferring from place to place he got through to the Child Welfare Department. He knew that this was the best way to get her back legally. Bring her to Child Welfare himself, then go through them again to get her back. It was a pain but it had to be done.

“Child Welfare, how can I help you?” Came the female voice from the other end of the phone.

“I found a young girl on the street the other night and I know I have to legally turn her over to you. I would like to arrange for a pick up for her.” Brisbane hated this part, he didn’t want Sam to go. Sam was sitting next to him, she had her arms wrapped around one of his.

“You say you found her the other night, why didn’t you turn her over right away.” The voice was slightly accusatory.

Brisbane had worried about this. He knew he should have turned her over right away but he had wanted to help her out himself for a little while. “I just kept her long enough to buy her some decent clothes. And to get her to understand that this was the best way for her to go.”

“Okay we can over look that in this case, but I warn you if you have hurt that girl in anyway the charges that will be pressed will be severe.” The voice was still stern.

“I have not hurt her in anyway, and I resent that you would even imply I did.” Brisbane growled.

“Okay, as long as we understand each other.” The female sounded mollified. “Give me your address and we’ll send a child welfare officer to pick her up.”

Brisbane gave the woman his address and she told him that an officer would be there in about forty-five minutes to pick Sam up. When he hung up Brisbane felt deflated, he kept telling himself that this was for the best. He then had to tell Sam the same thing. “Don’t worry kiddo everything will work out for the best. They’ll find you a nice place to live and you won’t have to be on the streets anymore. Anyway you have my numbers, if you need me for any reason give me a call and I’ll do anything I can for you.”

“Okay, I’ll call you as soon as I know what’s going to happen to me. I just hope you won’t mind if I call you a lot. I think I’ll need to hear your voice once in a while to remind myself that I have you as a friend.” Sam was openly crying now, she knew she was going to be miserable for at least the first few days. She had never been this attached to anyone before, except for maybe when she was a little kid, before her mother had gotten too bad.

“No problem kiddo you can call me for whatever reason, even if it’s only to tell me how your day was. Let’s make sure you have all of your things before they get here.”

Sam opened up her duffle bag and sorted through the stuff inside making sure she had everything. While she did that Brisbane made her a root beer float. “It’ll be okay kiddo, everything will work out fine, just think positive.”

“I’m trying to; I just wish I could stay with you. I want you to be my dad. I doubt my mother even knew who my dad was so I never had one. You’ve been far nicer to me than anyone else. I just want to stay.” Sam started sniffing, not wanting to cry anymore.

“I know kiddo, but if I was to keep you with out going through the legal process I could be arrested. I know you don’t want that to happen to me.” Brisbane ruffled her hair again which would probably be for the last time in quite a while.

Sam finished her float in silence not certain that she could keep from crying if she started speaking again. Brisbane had a pretty good idea of what was going through her mind and he knew better than to pester her. He sat down at the table across from her lending his support by his mere presence.

After a long while a page from the front entrance broke the silence. It was of course the officer from Child Welfare. Brisbane informed the woman that they would be at the door shortly.

“It’s time kiddo, put on your jacket.”

Sam shoved her way from the table numbly and slowly put on her jacket. She was hoping that this was just a bad dream and that she would wake up and Brisbane would be her father. As they headed down the hall Sam’s stomach knotted up with fear, she had just found a father and now they were taking her away from him.

There was a female puma waiting for them when they got to the entrance. “You must be Samantha and Brisbane!” She said in an overly friendly voice.

Sam glared at her. This person was happy about taking her away from Brisbane and that pissed her off. "It's Sam." She snarled.

"Um... yes, Sam. Are you ready to go?" The officer asked a little hesitantly, caught off guard by the anger radiating off Sam.

"No. I'd much rather stay here, where I know I'm safe." Sam growled, she wasn't going to go without a fight. Brisbane hoped that this act of loyalty would be remembered when he tried to adopt her.

"But you have to come dear. We can't let you stay with someone who isn't in the system. We already have a nice home picked out for you to stay at." The woman's voice returned to its honey flavored tone.

Sam wasn't about to be taken in by such stupidity. "Yeah a home where you've never done a proper background check. A home where the father gets a little too friendly with his charges. Thank you, no. I'd rather stay here with the man who rescued me off the street."

The puma was losing her patience with the impertinent teenager. "I don't know what you've heard or where you heard it from, but we do thorough background checks on all foster families. We also investigate any reasonable complaint made by any child in the system. You will be in a place that is perfectly safe."

"Tell that to Kelly Waverly, the sixteen year old who ran away from her foster home after the father started groping her when he thought she was asleep. She called you people and you did nothing when the dad said she was making it up. After the officers left he beat her for calling them." Kelly had been one of the first girls she had met on the street. She and a couple of others were the ones that had convinced Sam that foster families were the last places she wanted to be.

"Now I'm sure that was an exaggeration..."

"There was nothing exaggerated about the cigarette burns. On her face!" Samantha had a couple of other horror stories ready.

"Well... I... I mean there are always irregularities. We can't always..." The officer's voice trailed off as Sam started up again.

"What about Alexander Thompson? He was beaten nightly with a wire hanger. Or Tammy Darkwolf, who was raped repeatedly by two of the other foster children? Where were you for any of them?" Sam wasn't going to leave until she

made her point damn clear. “Here I’m safe. Here I don’t run the risk of getting raped or beaten. The only thing I might run the risk of here is getting smothered while being hugged. Here is where I want to stay.”

Brisbane put one paw gently on Sam’s shoulder. “What do you say officer? Can she stay here?”

The puma looked from Sam to Brisbane and back again. She realized that it maybe in the raccoon’s best interest to stay with her rescuer but she had to go, she couldn’t stay with someone who wasn’t in the system. “I’m really sorry, but I can’t leave her with you. She has to go to an approved foster home.”

Sam was about to start in again when Brisbane turned her around to face him. He knelt down so that he was at eye level with her. “Go on kiddo you’ll be okay. You know how to get a hold of me and if anything happens I’ll come straighten things out.” He looked at the officer, with a stern warning in his voice. “If she has problems that you don’t take care of, I will. Is that clear?”

“Is that a threat?” The puma asked.

“No. It’s a statement of fact. If she comes to harm people will pay very dearly.” Brisbane’s voice was darkly ominous. “You may want to tell the family she’s going to about me. I’m her guardian angel. And I can be a very destructive angel.”

The officer swallowed hard. She realized that Brisbane meant every word he had just said, and that scared the hell out of her. She was sure that if something were to happen to the girl nothing would stop him from pursuing his sense of justice whether legal or not. “I’ll give them the warning.”

“Okay kiddo we’ve made our points. You’ll be safe or others will be sorry.” He hugged Sam tightly while she clung onto him crying.

“I don’t want to go.”

“I know you don’t, but you’ve got to.” He gently squeezed her one more time before he let her go.

Sam returned the squeeze before letting go. “I’ll call you as soon as I can.”

The officer led Sam to her car and put her bag in the trunk. Sam got into the passenger side seat and closed the door; she waved sadly as the car drove off. Brisbane hated himself for letting her go but he knew it couldn’t be helped.

February 2002

When Brisbane woke up on Monday morning the first thing he did after eating was turn the computer on to start doing research on law firms specializing in family law. By eleven he had picked out what he felt would be a good office, they specialized in adoptions. He reached for his phone and dialed the number.

“Corrin and Fox family law. How can I help you?” The voice was young and male.

“Yes I’d like to make an appointment for a consultation.” Brisbane said with confidence. This was the first step on a journey that was going to make him a better fur.

“What is the matter which you wish consultation on? It will help us pick who you see.”

“Adoption.” Brisbane replied.

There was slight humming from the other end. “Ms. Branson has an opening today at two if that works for you.”

Brisbane smiled, that worked perfectly for him, the sooner the better. “Two will be fine. How much will the consultation cost?”

“That depends on how long it takes, but we charge a hundred and fifty dollars an hour for the services of our junior partners. If that is a problem we can recommend a less experienced firm that has lower rates...”

Brisbane was amazed that they would be nice enough to recommend someone else if he didn’t have the money. “No, no, that won’t be necessary.” He got directions to the office before hanging up.

“Okay,” he said to himself, “I have a few things to do before meeting with the lawyer.”

The first thing he did was eat a quick lunch, and washed the dishes from that and breakfast. Next he took a long shower getting himself as clean as possible. He toweled off and looked at himself in the mirror. The first thing he noticed was how intimidating he was, seven foot four, and nearing three and a half bills all of it muscle. Most people thought he should be a pro athlete not a bartender. The simple fact though was that he wasn't really into sports except for watching them. He smiled at his reflection, which eased the image slightly; everyone said he had a friendly face.

Next he headed into the bedroom to put on his suit. It was a charcoal grey job and classically styled. He didn't wear it much since in his line of work the clothing of choice was jeans and a t-shirt. And his suppliers on the other side of the veil wouldn't think much of a suit. He had the suit for special occasions like weddings, funerals, and other such events. He hadn't really changed in size since the last alterations so it still fit well.

He realized that if he was going to have a chance of adopting Sam he would have to pull out all the stops and look as professional as possible, that meant he needed a briefcase. He drove out to an office supply store and picked out a nice leather briefcase. He also bought a couple of legal pads and some nice pens. First impressions were lasting impressions he had always believed, and if there was ever a time for a good first impression this was it.

After the quick shopping trip he headed for the law firm. He got there with fifteen minutes to spare. He walked up to the reception desk and looked at a young rabbit. "Hello my name is Brisbane Volsung. I have a two o'clock appointment with Ms. Branson."

The rabbit shook a little feeling awfully intimidated. He looked at the schedule to confirm the appointment. "Y... yes he...here you are. I'll... I'll call her office and... and let her know you're here."

Brisbane nodded his head. "Thank you." And then he found a seat and got ready to wait.

After about five minutes a tall, female otter walked into the room from the hallway of offices. "Mr. Volsung?" She asked.

"That's me." Brisbane answered standing up.

If the otter was intimidated by him she didn't show it. "I'm Karen Branson," she said offering him her paw.

Brisbane gently shook her paw. “Nice to meet you.”

“Follow me to my office.” She led him back down the hall to a fairly large office.

Brisbane looked around the office and took in all the details. Oak desk, one wall covered in bookshelves, two large chairs in front of the desk, and diplomas on the wall from a well respected law school in the area. He nodded to himself satisfied with what he saw.

Ms. Branson motioned him to take a seat and once he had she sat down herself. “Now I understand that you are here on a matter of adoption?”

“That’s right. A teenage girl who I handed over to Child Welfare yesterday after I found her on the streets.” Brisbane said.

“May I ask where your wife is?” The lawyer asked.

“I’m not married.”

“Ah, you do realize that will make things very difficult for you?”

Brisbane nodded. “I do and that’s why I came here. Sam, that’s the girl’s name, wanted to stay with me but since I’m not a registered foster parent I couldn’t legally keep her.”

Karen nodded in return. “You say she wanted to stay with you? May I ask why?”

“According to her I’m the first decent guy she ever met. Her mother is a crack user and prostitute. She let a customer use Sam when the poor girl was thirteen, so she ran away. After a year and a half on the street she ran into me. When I found her she was prostituting herself for food and it was a freezing night. I took her in for a couple of days, bought her some new clothes and was generally nice to her. When the Child Welfare officer came to pick her up yesterday Sam got nasty, telling horror stories she had heard from other teens that had run away from foster homes.” Brisbane kept talking, putting everything out on the table.

Once he was finished talking Karen asked him pretty much the same question that Sigurd had asked him two days earlier. “So why do you really want to adopt her?”

Brisbane didn't even have to stop to think about the answer. "Because in the couple of days she was with me I grew really fond of her. She's had a rough life and deserves a chance to have a real family. One that'll watch out for her. She makes me feel special and I think I can be a good father for her, give her everything that she's never had."

"May I ask what you do for a living? I need to make sure that you can afford us as well as the county is going to want to know that you'll have enough money to support the both of you."

Brisbane smiled, he was a business owner and money wasn't a real worry for him. "I own and tend bar at a tavern called The Mystic Wolf. It does very good business and I personally make over a hundred and fifty thousand a year. As far as being able to afford you, my cousin, who has quite a bit of money, is helping me with that."

Karen smiled, "That's good, cause you may need it. I'm not going to lie to you; this could get to be quite expensive. Adoption isn't a cheap process. What is in your favor is that you're trying to adopt a teenager, not many people want to adopt teenagers. On the other paw being a single male hurts you. The county isn't going to look favorably on you for that."

Brisbane nodded to himself. "That's why I came here. I knew I'd need a good lawyer to help me through this whole process as quickly as possible."

"Well then I think we can work together on this. Let's get started."

For the next half hour they started working on the outline of the case. They made appointments for further consultations and a time when she could come by the tavern to see what kind of place it was so she could prepare Brisbane for a visit from Child Welfare.

At the end of the meeting Karen looked Brisbane square in the eyes. "Everything looks good. If what you've told me is true you should be able to adopt Sam, but the process will take a while. I'll start making calls to Child Welfare first thing tomorrow and see where things lie with her on that end."

"Okay. I trust that you'll keep me informed of everything as it happens."

Karen smiled, "Of course. It would only make things more difficult if I was to keep you in the dark. Well I think I have everything I need so I'll walk you out."

Brisbane stood and pulled on his coat. “That’s alright Ms. Branson. I can see myself out. Have a good day.”

“Good day Mr. Volsung. I’ll be in touch.”

Brisbane smiled happily to himself as he left the office. He was on his way to be Sam’s dad and that was as good a reason to smile as he had had in years.

When Brisbane got home he checked his messages and found that Sam had called and left him the phone number of the house she was staying at. She sounded okay so he wasn’t worried but he called her just to see how she was doing.

The phone picked up on the third ring. “Hello?” The voice was male.

“Hello. My name is Brisbane, I’m a friend of Sam’s. I was wondering if I could speak to her?” The giant wolf used his friendliest tone of voice.

“Ah yes Sam said that you would be calling.” The voice had a nervous quality to it; Brisbane guessed his warning had been delivered. “I’ll go get her right now.”

There was a momentary pause as the man went to get Sam. While he was waiting for Sam to get on the phone Brisbane sat down at his computer and looked up the address that the number belonged to. He wasn’t sure if it annoyed him that the number wasn’t unlisted. When Sam did eventually get to the phone she sounded very happy.

“Brisbane! I’m so glad you called. How are you doing?”

“Hey there Sam. I’m not bad. I’m just calling to see how you’re doing.” Brisbane was happy to hear that she at least sounded well.

“I’m doing well enough. No one’s tried anything at least. The child welfare officer delivered your message. That sort of took the parents by surprise.” Sam paused for a while. “Can we get together some? I would like to be able to see you in person from time to time.”

Brisbane gave a short laugh. “That’s fine with me kiddo, we’ll figure out a place and time later.”

“Thanks, I just wanted to make sure that you wouldn’t be a stranger. I never had many friends, and I want someone who I can talk to about anything.”

Brisbane was happy that she wanted him in her life. “So are there any other foster kids there?”

“Yeah there a couple of us. Apparently Anne, that’s my foster mother, can’t have kids so they decided to be foster parents.” Sam said. “Brian and Jenny’s parents got picked up on drug charges. All of their family members who live in the area are in prison as well on varying charges. They’re pretty young so they aren’t complete jerks yet.”

Brisbane shook his head. “Some people shouldn’t have kids. Look is there anything you need that we forgot to get?”

Sam paused while she thought about whether or not she should ask for what she really wanted. “Can I get a picture of you? I just want to be able to look at it and imagine that you’re my dad.”

The longing in Sam’s voice was as plain as Brisbane’s fur was white. As painful as it was to hear it made him happy to know she wanted him as her dad. “No problem kiddo. When we get together I’ll give you one.”

“Thanks. Look I should get going. Jerry is tapping his watch to say that I’ve been on to long, I think he needs the phone.”

Brisbane smiled wishing that they could have more time on the phone. “Okay. Take care kiddo we’ll get together as soon as possible.”

When Sam hung up Brisbane looked at his watch. He didn’t have to go into the Mystic Wolf tonight, but he decided he’d go anyway. He got out of his suit and changed into a pair of jeans and a work shirt. Pulling on his jacket he headed out to the tavern.

The next day Brisbane got a call that woke him up at eleven. He looked blearily at the clock and thought about letting it go to voice mail but then thought better of it. 'Who ever is calling better have something important to say in the first ten seconds or I'm hanging up on them.'

"Hello?" He said sleepily. "You have ten seconds to prove to me that you're worth talking to."

"I'm sorry Mr. Volsung did I wake you?" Brisbane was too tired to recognize the voice.

"Seven seconds left."

"This is your lawyer. I have news about Sam." Said Ms. Branson.

That got Brisbane to stop his mental count down. "Sorry Ms. Branson. I went to work last night and didn't get to bed until almost five. What information do you have for me?"

"Well I talked to Child Welfare. They looked for Sam's mother, and found her in a police report."

"Oh, is she in jail?" Brisbane asked.

"No. She was found dead in her apartment about seven months ago. According to the coroner's report the death was most likely caused by an accidental overdose. That opens up the process for an adoption; now Sam won't have to divorce her mother, which is always a messy process." The lawyer was as glad for this news as Brisbane was.

Brisbane didn't want to seem ghoulish about benefiting from someone's death, but in this case he'd make an exception. "Will this make things easier on me?"

"Well not as far as the court is concerned. You'll still have to prove that you'd be a fit parent. You don't have a criminal record. We had a check run just to confirm what you told us. The process will probably still take a few months."

Brisbane had an important question for her. "How would it be if I had contact with Sam while the process is on going?"

Karen thought about that for a few minutes. “Well that should help your case immensely. If it’s seen that Sam wishes to have contact with you then that strengthens your case considerably; if she didn’t want to have contact with you that would shoot your case down instantly.”

Brisbane smiled things were looking good then. “Good. Sam called me yesterday and asked if we could get together.”

“Make it a public place and at least one of her foster parents should be there.” Karen advised.

“Okay. Is there anything else we need to discuss?”

“You are going to be ready for me to meet you at your pub tomorrow night, right?”

Brisbane thought of something. “Could you meet me at my cousin’s place first? It’ll be easier to find a parking spot there and I’ll need to talk to you about the place before you go in.”

“Is there something wrong with the place?” The lawyer was suddenly suspicious.

“Nothing illegal if that’s what you’re thinking, but it is a very unique place. I want to have a chance to explain what the place is like before you go in.”

“Okay as long as it can be explained I’ll agree to it.” Karen said mollified.

Brisbane gave her directions to Sigurd’s place and then went back to sleep.

Shortly after Brisbane got up in the afternoon he heard his phone ring. He looked at the caller ID and saw that it was the number Sam was staying at. “Hello?”

“Brisbane,” Sam’s voice was highly agitated, “I really need to see you.”

“What’s wrong kiddo?” Brisbane had a good idea but he was going to let her say it first.

“It’s my mother. They found her dead in her apartment; drug overdose.” It sounded to Brisbane like Sam was trying to bottle up some major emotions. “I really need to talk to you about it.”

“Do you know where Grand Ice Cream is?” Brisbane asked.

“I think so. It’s not too far from the Mystic Wolf right? About five or six blocks right?”

“That’s right. Can you meet me there?”

Sam thought for a second. “Anne’s out with Brian and Jenny, and Jerry’s still at work. I have no way to get there.”

Karen had told Brisbane that if he was to meet with Sam that she should be accompanied by one of her foster parents, but she hadn’t counted on this. “Here’s what you do. Leave a note for your foster parents telling them where you’re going. Then call a taxi and have the cabby take you to Grand Ice Cream, I’ll pay him once you’re there.”

“Okay, I can do that. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

“Okay kiddo I’ll be waiting there for you.” Brisbane said as he hung up.

He got himself ready to go and headed out to the ice cream parlor. Before he left he grabbed a picture of himself that had been taken inside the Mystic Wolf. ‘Well this isn’t the reason I would have chosen for our meeting.’

Brisbane drove the mile to Grand Ice Cream, found a parking spot and then took up a watch on the bench outside the store. After almost thirty minutes the cab pulled up and Sam got out. Brisbane went over to the driver’s side paid the driver and gave him a good sized tip. After that was taken care of Brisbane followed Sam into the ice cream parlor.

Sam looked over the large selection of homemade ice cream for a while before making her decision. Brisbane ordered for both of them, paid, and then they found a table in the corner of the next room.

“So kiddo,” Brisbane started, “let’s talk.”

Sam stared at her bowl of ice cream. “They found my mother about seven months ago. According to the report she had been dead for a couple of weeks before they found the body, the neighbors complained about the smell. I also found out that she had filed a missing persons report for me. I didn’t think she would. I thought she’d be happy to be rid of me, if she even noticed.

“She was never there for me. She was always high. She was fucking a few different guys a night just so she could get her crack. Fuck she even let one of her Johns use me. Me! A goddamn thirteen year old girl! She let him use me! She drove me to run away, and I started to turn into her. I started prostituting myself because of her!” Sam’s rant was beginning to attract the attention of a couple of the other patrons.

“But she still cared enough to file a missing persons report. She did love me. But I hate her. For everything she ever did to me I hate her. But she was my mother. She was my ... my...” Sam burst into tears, great sobs wracking her entire body.

Brisbane moved over next to Sam and put his arms around her. She turned a little, grabbed his shirt and soaked it in tears. “I know kiddo. You have every right to hate your mother, but that doesn’t change the fact that she was your mother. I wish I could do something to make it all right.”

“Why does it hurt so much? Why can’t I just hate her? Why do I have to feel so torn up inside? Every time I stop hating her, to think of her as maybe having loved me, I remember all the shit she put me through and I start hating her again, and it starts all over. I just want to forget her. I want her to be so far locked in my past that I never have to think about her again.” She dissolved into further tears, gasping for breath. Her entire body shook as she clung to Brisbane like he was the only stable thing in a cyclone.

“It’s okay little one. Some day everything will make sense. I know it hurts right now, I really do, but someday it won’t hurt so much.” A Masters in therapy and fourteen years experience tending bar had taught him what had to be said at this moment.

“I want a family; a real family; a family where I know that I’m loved, where I can return the love and mean it.” She looked up at Brisbane. “Is that too much to ask for? Is it too much to just have loving parents? I’d even settle for one parent. I just want a family.”

Brisbane hugged her tightly. “I know kiddo. Some day you’ll have a family, and then you’ll be happy, but I hate to tell you there will always be part of you that hurts.”

“Why do I have to hurt? When will it be my turn to be happy? I was happy with you. I want to be with you. I want to be your daughter.” She quickly started crying again.

Brisbane wished he could tell her that he was trying to adopt her but he didn't want to get her hopes up in case it didn't go through. “You'll get adopted. You'll be someone's daughter.”

“I just want to be your daughter.” Sam had gotten under enough control that she was down to sniffing.

“You'll always have me as a friend, just remember that.”

“I'll try.” She said letting go of him.

“Now eat your ice cream. It'll help you feel better.” He knew it wouldn't really help matters but it would give her something to focus on for a little while.

Sam and Brisbane ate their ice cream in silence. As soon as they were finished Brisbane told her that it was time for him to take her back to her foster parents.

The drive was quiet; Brisbane didn't want to push Sam to talk which she didn't seem in the mood to do anymore. Sam talked just enough to give him directions to her foster parents' place.

When they got to the foster home Brisbane got out of the SUV and walked Sam up to the front door. She didn't have keys to the place so they had to knock and wait for someone to open the door.

Jerry was the one to open the door. “Where the hell have you been Sam?!” He yelled at the young raccoon.

“She was with me,” Brisbane said flatly, “and I will not tolerate you yelling at her.”

Hearing the voice coming from more than a foot over his head the rabbit finally looked up. “I take it that you're Brisbane.”

“I am.”

“Give me one reason that I shouldn’t have you arrested for kidnapping?” snapped Jerry who immediately didn’t like the giant of a wolf.

“Simple. I’m Sam’s guardian angel, and she came to me to talk to.” Brisbane said calmly. “She wanted someone to talk to and you and your wife weren’t around, and I doubt she’d have talked to you anyways.”

“Sam, get inside. I want to talk to your so called 'guardian angel' alone.” Sam slouched past Jerry and pointedly slammed the door behind her. “Now that we’re alone I’m going to tell you that I don’t want you coming near that girl again.”

“Then I’m going to have to disappoint you because anytime she wants me I’ll be there as soon as possible, and there is nothing you can do to stop me.”

“Then I’ll get a restraining order against you.” Fumed the rabbit.

Brisbane laughed. “Sam would have to be the one to file the complaint and I seriously doubt that she’d do that. Anyways all she wanted to do was talk.”

“And what did she have to say, might I ask?”

“In case you haven’t heard they found her mother, dead from a drug overdose. Sam found out that her mother had filed a missing persons report; that knowledge was hard for her to take and she needed to talk with me to help her sort it out.” Brisbane was developing an extreme dislike for this jerk.

“She could have waited until I had gotten back from the hospital to talk. She didn’t need to run off to some bartender to talk to.” Jerry said; trying to make the occupation of bartending sound like it was the job of useless people.

“And what, may I ask, do you do that qualifies you to talk to her?” Brisbane had to admit that this guy had balls to be mouthing off to him.

Jerry puffed out his chest and tried talking down to Brisbane, failing miserably. “I, sir, am a psychologist specializing in child and teen therapy.”

That locked Brisbane’s dislike of this guy. “Then you should realize that Sam sees you as part of the system that, in her view, stole her away from the one person she knows she can trust. She won’t talk to you because she has no reason to trust you. Sure you provide a roof but other than that you’ve done nothing for her. You weren’t the one who got her off the streets and showed her that there are nice people in the

world. I was the one that did that for her. She knows she can tell me everything and that I won't hold it against her."

The psychologist wasn't impressed by this logic from a mere bartender. "And what gives you the qualifications to listen to her problems and help her?"

"Well if fourteen years of helping people sort their problems out over a pint counts for nothing, there is always my Masters in psycho therapy from St. Thomas. I've heard stories from my patrons that they aren't comfortable telling their shrinks, and they always come back to tell me how much better they felt afterwards. You may think I'm nothing more than a glorified drink slinger, but I'm also a pair of ears that are always ready to be chewed on."

That stopped Jerry cold. He hadn't expected Brisbane to have anything better than a high school education; a Masters meant he was dealing with someone who knew what he was talking about. "So you've got a Masters; that still doesn't qualify you to help Sam." He said desperately.

Brisbane had the advantage now. "On the contrary, she would only see a therapist as another adult not to trust. She doesn't need a professional listener, she needs a friend. And I'm that friend."

"Well then, if Sam wants to see you she can, but from now on either my wife or I have to be there."

"I'll agree to that. I'll be going now." He was about to turn around when he remembered the picture in his pocket. "Here, give this to Sam. It's the picture of me that she wanted."

Brisbane turned on his heel and headed back to his SUV. Once he was out of sight Jerry walked back into his house shaking as the adrenalin that had let him face the giant left his system.

When Karen got to Sigurd's place she looked at the house and realized just how massive it was. It was an old Victorian mansion so common to the area. She walked up the stairs to the front door and saw Brisbane waiting for her. "Good evening Mr. Volsung."

“Please call me Brisbane. Is it okay if I call you Karen?” Brisbane asked.

Karen nodded. “It would probably be easier if we were on a first name basis.”

“Well, follow me.” Brisbane said and began leading her off the porch.

“So what is it you have to tell me about this place of yours?”

Brisbane smiled slightly. “Ah the direct approach. I like that.”

He paused slightly. “Do you believe in magick Karen?”

“If you’re talking anything other than David Copperfield and the like I’d have to say no. I’m interested in facts not fairy tales.” The lawyer said firmly.

“What if I said I can change your mind in the next fifteen minutes?” His voice was casual.

“Then I’d say you’re crazy and I would drop this case and say you weren’t fit to be a parent. Magic is the realm of fantasy writers and movies, it isn’t real.” Her voice was firm.

Brisbane nodded. “I expected nothing less of you. However I feel it only fair to warn you that you should keep an open mind before you go in. Some of the customers may surprise you.”

They walked in silence the rest of the block to the tavern. When they got to the door Karen noticed the dull roar coming from the place. “It sounds busy for a Thursday?”

“We’re a very popular place. Many of our regulars come in several times a week.” Brisbane opened the door and motioned for Karen to precede him.

The lawyer walked in and the first thing her eyes settled on was the dragon sitting at the bar drinking a beer. She looked over her shoulder shaking. “What’s going on here?” Her voice was high and quavering.

Brisbane grinned widely. “Magick is very real and here it shows itself loud and proud with an energy that could power the state of California. You’re safe here. We don’t tolerate rowdiness, even from gods.”

“But this is impossible.” Karen said as Brisbane gently pushed her forward.

“Not at all. There are many wizards, sorcerers, mages, warlocks, witches etcetera around here. With a little help from them and some others we managed to knock down a piece of the barrier that separates our world from the magickal one. The result is this bar. Here dragons and gods socialize with normal furs.”

“How are you going to explain this to the people from Child Welfare?” Karen asked starting to think about the logical aspect again.

“It’s simple, I’ll use a spell on them. They’ll only see what I want them to see. They’ll see a respectable bar. When they leave their memory will be a little fuzzy on the details but they’ll remember that everything’s as it should be. I’ve used the spell on the health inspector several times.” Brisbane knew what he was doing.

“Okay get me dinner and explain everything very slowly so I can understand what this place is like.”

Brisbane found a quiet booth for them and motioned for Lori to bring over a menu. “Here’s how it works. Throughout the world there are lines of magickal energy called ley-lines. When these lines cross the resulting point is called a nexus. At these nexus points there is a huge amount of magickal energy which causes the barrier between our world and the magickal world, the Veil, to become very thin. This bar and the area surrounding it, is on such a nexus point. A couple of years ago I bought this property with the intention of breaking down the veil in this location and putting in a bar to serve customers from both sides.”

Brisbane paused when Lori arrived with the menus. He let Karen look over the massive list of food and decide on something before he continued. “With the help of local practitioners of magick on this side and dragons, gods, fairies and a few others on the other side we were able to break down the Veil. The Veil will eventually fall on its own someday in the future; there was a time before it was even here at all. Until then this is the only area where it is down in the world, and on that point I have reassurance on the highest levels.”

Karen was still having a hard time believing what she was seeing let alone hearing. “How on Earth were you able to get the help of creatures on the other side of this Veil thing? I mean if you couldn’t cross over already how could you make contact?”

This was always something Brisbane had to clear up for non-practitioners the first time they came in. “Okay you can’t physically go to the other side from anywhere

but here, but you can travel out of body on that side. As far as getting the help that's where things get a little weird. For some reason my cousin, Sigurd, has a lot of pull on the other side of the Veil, especially among dragons. I've heard dragons here mention him by the title of 'The Dragons' Bane'. Whatever that means, it causes them to have great respect for him, and many will go out of their way to help him. Truthfully I think most of them are a little afraid of him, and I think he's more comfortable around them than he is around most furs."

While Karen thought upon this Lori came back to take their order. Karen ordered something to eat but was stuck on something to drink since the drinks list was absolutely massive, with over a hundred beers alone.

"May I make a suggestion?" Brisbane asked.

"Please do."

"Lori, get Ms. Branson here a Sea of Sun." Brisbane said with a wink.

"Perfect way to forget the weather outside all right." she said nodding towards the door; she then left with the order.

"I've never heard of a Sea of Sun. What's in one? Remember I have to drive home so I can't afford to get drunk." Karen said a little worried.

Brisbane smiled and shook his head. "Oh, don't worry there isn't any alcohol in one. Please don't ask me to describe it, you have to drink it to understand what one's like. A lot of the drinks here are like that, they tend to be expensive too. Actually all our drinks are on the pricy side compared to most bars in the area. We use higher quality ingredients so everything tastes better and goes down more smoothly. Heck if you look at our beer list you won't find a cheap, mass produced beer anywhere, all of them are either microbrews or foreign."

Karen thought about this for a moment and wondered about the business side of it. "But doesn't it drive customers away by having high prices? Well I mean normal furs anyway. Looking at the menu the food isn't exactly what you call bar food, well some of it is I guess, but a lot of it is expensive. Are the furs from this side of this Veil thing willing to pay the high prices just for the atmosphere? Sure it's unique, but how can younger folks afford it?"

"Well as you said it mostly comes down to the fact that they can mingle with people from the other side of the Veil. Heck a couple of furs have gotten married and moved to the other side. As far as pricing goes we charge for the quality of the food.

We have top flight chefs who could easily work at five star restaurants. We provide that quality of food without those kinds of prices.” Brisbane and his employees always had to explain the high prices to newcomers from this side of the Veil. “Also a couple nights a week we have karaoke night.”

“What’s so special about a karaoke night? Other than listening to people singing badly?”

Brisbane smiled; the reason was what made this place especially popular on Monday and Wednesday nights. “If you have the guts to go up and sing you get a free drink. Anything you want with one exception, and the existence of that drink is only known to a very small pawful of people.”

At that time Lori arrived with their drinks. The calico smiled brightly at the lawyer as she put a pint glass filled with a glowing liquid that started deep red at the bottom and shifted to a bright yellow at the top. “Enjoy a Sea of Sun.” She said and then put a coke with a wedge of lime in front of Brisbane and left to help a regular who had just found a table.

Karen picked up the glass and looked around at it trying to figure out why it was glowing. “Um Brisbane...”

“Yes.”

“Why is this glowing?”

Brisbane smiled easily. “Oh that. It has to do with the ingredients. Taste it. I assure you, you’ll enjoy it. Think of it as an adventure.”

Karen sniffed it hesitantly, then took a tentative sip. She couldn’t describe the taste to herself. It was warm and cool at the same time, but what did it taste like? She decided she liked the feeling and took a long pull at the drink. As soon as she put the glass on the table it hit her like a tidal wave. Her pupils fully dilated and her head flopped back and she was staring sightlessly at the ceiling.

As soon as her reaction hit, Brisbane started quietly counting down from twenty. The reaction was typical and he knew precisely what was happening to her, and how long the reaction would last.

“... Six. Five. Four. Three. Two. Now.”

Karen's eyes snapped back into focus and she looked back to Brisbane. "What the fuck was that!"

Brisbane grinned warmly. "Maybe I should have warned you about that."

Karen was scared and confused. "What the hell did you just give me!? LSD!? I was on a beach, the sun was rising out of the sea; it looked like the water had caught fire. I could feel and smell the cool breeze off the water and feel the warmth of the sun on my fur. I was there. What the hell was that?" The law firm did random drug screening; she could lose her job if she was found to have a hallucinogenic in her system.

"That was a memory, one of mine in fact. I distilled it into a liquid, and a single drop of that is put into a mix of other alchemical ingredients, though most of what you just drank was ordinary spring water. The drink will affect you like that only once in your life. From now on though, every time you drink one you'll have the same after feeling. It's a great treatment for seasonal affective disorder."

As weird as this place was this drink had just topped it. "I just drank one of your own memories?"

"Oh yes. I had just spent an incredible summer night with a young lady in Florida and I was standing out on the beach almost totally alone and watched the sunrise out of the Atlantic. I think about that night quite often and it always makes me feel warm and happy no matter what else is going on. Right after I opened this bar I found an alchemist on the other side of the Veil who could distill the memory for me for use in the drink. All I had to do was tell him what I wanted it for and he taught me enough alchemy to extract the memories and put them into drinks."

Karen shook her head in disbelief. "Do you have more drinks like this?"

"Oh yes, lots of them. Closing in on thirty. Not all of them are my memories some are from my employees or friends. All of them are happy memories, and some are pretty sexually explicit." Unless you had a change of underwear with you it was not a good idea to order a screaming orgasm deluxe. "You have to be a little voyeuristic to distill your own memories for this purpose."

"You'd have to be to let people in on who you are deep down inside." Karen took another tentative sip of the drink. She again felt the warm sun on her fur and smelled the cool ocean breeze but the vision didn't return.

"Well to continue, now that you have seen this place what do you think?"

Karen looked around again. “You’re right magic is real. I have to admit it that I never thought I’d say it in my life.”

“So I take it that you’ll keep the case.”

“While this place is definitely out of the ordinary I see no basis for the child welfare blocking you from adoption just because you own and run a bar. Especially since you have that spell you told me about.”

Brisbane smiled to himself; this was going to work out.

For the next month Brisbane had a series of meetings with Karen and the people from child welfare. Things were at a stand still and to make matters worse every time Sam called him she sounded more and more depressed. It all came to a head in early April when he got a call from Sam’s foster mother.

“Hello. Brisbane here.”

“Brisbane this is Anne, Sam’s foster mother. You need to get to St. Mary’s hospital now!” Anne sounded like she was border line hysterical.

Brisbane was on the verge of a panic, this couldn’t be good. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Sam. She’s attempted suicide. She left a note for you apologizing for taking this way out.

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“It’s Sam. She’s attempted suicide. She left a note for you apologizing for taking this way out.”

Brisbane dropped the phone and rushed to put on his shoes and then ran out the door, barely remembering to lock it. He hopped in his car and was lucky that he didn’t get stopped for speeding as he headed for the hospital.

When he got to the hospital he parked his SUV and ran full bore to the entrance. When he got to the front desk he slammed his fists on the counter causing the fox sitting there to jump. “Where is Samantha Waters?” He said in a low, threatening growl. He wanted to make it damn clear that no one was going to stop him from seeing her.

The fox quickly checked the computer wanting to be rid of the giant as quickly as possible. “She’s in the ICU, room 203.”

“How do I get there?” Brisbane continued to growl.

“The elevators are just to the left of the desk here. Go to the second floor and take a left.”

Brisbane nodded his thanks and turned on his heel heading towards the elevators at a quick walk. He punched the button for the elevator and kept wanting to scream at the damn things to hurry up and get there. Once an elevator got to him he punched the button for the second floor and impatiently tapped his foot the entire way up.

Once he reached the second floor he turned left out of the elevator and rushed down the hall to room 203. He saw a female rabbit standing outside the door talking to a skunk in a lab coat. The rabbit waved at him. “Brisbane, over here.”

Brisbane stopped in front of her. “You’re Anne I take it? Thank you for calling me.”

Anne motioned to the skunk. “Brisbane this is Dr. Terrance Vendris, he’s one of the doctors on duty.”

Brisbane nodded his head. “Doctor. What can you tell me?”

The doctor shook his head. “Well Sam is in our ‘lucky to be alive’ category. She swallowed a full bottle of Percocet and almost a fifth of vodka. Fifteen minutes longer and she’d most certainly have died. As it is, it’s going to take a while for her liver to recover.”

All the desperation Brisbane had felt drained out of him and he went weak in the knees and almost collapsed in fear for the teenager’s life. “Please tell me she’s going to be okay?”

Dr. Vendris put a paw on Brisbane’s shoulder. “Well it’s too early to know about the long term damage to Sam’s liver, but she should make a full recovery.”

At that time Jerry arrived looking flustered. “I came as quickly as I could. How is she doing Terry?”

“She’s going to be fine Jerry.”

Brisbane was confused. “Wait, you two know each other?”

Dr. Vendris looked at Brisbane. “Of course we do. Jerry works at the Children’s Hospital where I also work several days a week.”

Brisbane nodded slowly, and suddenly a thought struck him and he went from worried for Sam to fully enraged with Jerry and Anne.

“What I want to know,” he growled, “is where Sam got the crap she dumped into her system.”

He rounded upon Jerry and grabbed him by his shirt and lifted him bodily off the floor so that Jerry was on eye level with him. “Where the fuck did she get the Percocet and vodka Jerry!?”

Jerry struggled for a second and then gave up. “I like to have a vodka martini after work. She must have found the liquor cabinet.”

Brisbane shook him. “And why wasn’t it locked you idiot!?”

“It’s ... it’s never been an issue before.” Jerry said feebly.

“Well it just became an issue! And where in Nifelheim did she get the damn Percocet!”

Anne spoke up, and prayed that Brisbane wouldn’t hurt her. “That was my fault. I had just gotten a new prescription for my back, and we don’t have a locking drug cabinet.”

Brisbane let go of Jerry who fell into a crumpled pile. “Well that settles it. You two are official morons. Dr. Vendris you are a witness, these two have been criminally neglectful as foster parents. Now where is there a phone I need to make a call.”

“Child Welfare has already been contacted.” Anne said.

“I’m not calling them. I’m calling my lawyer. Between your stupidity and that suicide note my case has just been cemented. Now doctor where is there a phone?”

Dr Vendris pointed down the hall. “At the desk there. You’ll also need to have them give you a pass so that the guards don’t try to remove you.”

Brisbane nodded. “Thank you doctor.” And then made his way to the desk.

As Jerry got back to his feet he glared down the hall at Brisbane. “I should have him arrested for assault.”

Dr. Vendris rounded on Jerry. “You do that and I go to the board of Children’s with what happened and why, and I’m sure they’ll fire you. You’ll be lucky if he doesn’t push to have charges of criminal neglect pressed against you. And if he does I’ll be a witness for the prosecution. You, of all people, should know that all that shit should have been locked up.”

Brisbane got over to the nurse’s station and was directed to the house phone after being given a pass. Brisbane pulled Karen Branson’s business card out of his wallet. He banged the wall temperamentally while he waited for her to pick up.

“Hello, Karen Branson, attorney at law. How can I help you?”

“Karen it’s me, Brisbane, I’m at St. Mary’s. Sam just tried to commit suicide. She took a full bottle of Percocet and downed close to a fifth of vodka to wash the pills down.” Brisbane said desperately.

Karen picked up on Brisbane’s alarm. “Is she going to be okay?”

“The doctor said she should make a full recovery, but that there is a chance of long term liver damage.” Brisbane needed to tell her what he had learned past Sam’s medical condition. “There something more important than that though.”

The lawyer was confused. “What could be more important than Sam’s medical condition?”

Brisbane took a deep breath trying to control himself. “Apparently Sam left a suicide note addressed to me. I haven’t seen it yet, but apparently she apologizes for taking the easy way out.”

The news of the note addressed to Brisbane got Karen excited. “Can you get a hold of the note?”

“I think so. Will this do for me what I think it will?”

“If you think it will help your case for becoming Sam’s adopted father then yes it should.” Karen sounded excited; this could be the break they needed. “I’m going to be right down, where in the hospital are you?”

“Room 203 in the ICU. How long will it take for you to get here?”

Karen looked at her watch. “I’ll be down in about twenty minutes.”

Brisbane nodded to himself. “I’ll see you then.” Brisbane hung up the phone and then headed back to Sam’s room.

Once he got back to where the others were standing he asked Anne to see the suicide note. Reluctantly she handed over the tear stained letter to him.

Dear Brisbane,

I hope you get this letter. I'm sorry. I'm so very, very sorry. You were the only one who ever understood me and I was kept from you. I couldn't take the pain anymore. You know the pain I'm writing of. I didn't need to know my mother loved me despite the shit she put me through. I've known a lot of assholes in my life, and while Anne wasn't a total asshole, Jerry was a real piece of work for keeping me from you.

You know how shitty my life has been and I just can't take it anymore since I don't have you to lean on. I could have taken it if only I had had you, but I didn't. Please don't be mad at what I've done. I know you said the pain would be dulled over time, but it has only gotten worse with out you to help.

Always remember that I love you Brisbane, and please keep me in your heart. Goodbye.

Love Sam

Brisbane had to keep himself from crumpling the letter, he knew he'd need it for his case. He turned back towards Jerry. "I knew you were keeping Sam from me. Now you know what happens. If you were any good as a psychologist you would have seen this coming, but I guess you are as incompetent a psychologist as you are a foster parent."

"I resent that." Jerry spluttered.

"Too damn bad for you then that it's the fucking truth." snarled Brisbane.

Ten minutes went by as the party waited for an officer from Child Welfare to arrive as well as Brisbane's lawyer. The puma who had picked up Sam from Brisbane's condo was the first to arrive. She walked up to Dr. Vendris and asked what had happened. She wasn't pleased with the answer.

"Well Jerry we'll be taking your other two foster charges while things get cleared up. You have put yourself in a bad situation since this was allowed to happen." She then turned to face Brisbane. "And what are you doing here?"

Brisbane wasn't going to let this woman intimidate him. "Anne called me as soon as she got to the hospital because Sam had left a suicide note addressed to me. So I came to see how she was doing since I am trying to adopt her."

"That doesn't mean you should be here."

"I told you that if anything happened to her I'd make sure there would be justice. If I had my way I'd have these two charged with criminal negligence, but I guess that's your call." Brisbane said with a slight snarl. "Anyway if you want we can wait for my lawyer to show up so she can discuss things with you for me."

The officer realized that she had no ability to get rid of Brisbane since he had every legal right to be there. She turned her attention on Dr. Vendris to find out Sam's exact condition. Not much time passed before Karen showed up.

"What's going on Brisbane?" Karen asked.

"I think you know the puma, she's from Child Welfare. The two rabbits are Anne and Jerry, they are, or were, Sam's foster parents. And the Skunk is Dr. Terrance Vendris." He pawed the suicide note over to Karen and let her read it.

"This is pretty good for your case; it'll help you a lot. We need to have a talk with the Child Welfare officer." Karen and Brisbane went over to where the officer was talking with Dr. Vendris. Karen cleared her throat to get the puma's attention.

"I think this note cements my client's case." Karen said in way of introduction.

The officer gave it a quick read and then looked at Brisbane and the lawyer. "Hardly. He's male; it's going to take a lot more than a suicide note from a fifteen year old to make a case. If your client was female this would be over by now, but since he's male then things are going to go a lot slower."

Karen smiled and pulled a mini-cassette recorder out of her pocket, hit rewind and then play. The officer heard her statement repeated in her own voice. "I think this will make a very good piece of evidence in a sex discrimination case. As you just said, you're slowing things down because my client is male. Not only could we sue you for custody of Sam, but we could also sue to have Brisbane compensated for the need to hire me. So what do you say?"

The officer's jaw just moved up and down. "That's ... that's hard ... hardly fair." She finally stammered.

“What isn’t fair is keeping Sam from a loving father. Brisbane has put up with a lot of bullshit from your department. Sam wants him as a father, so much so that she attempted suicide because she was prevented from seeing him. I think her view has been made clear.”

“Okay. You’re right. Brisbane has made every effort to prove that he is suitable to be Sam’s father. Our background checks and interviews have shown him to be a good person who wouldn’t hurt her. He doesn’t even have so much as a speeding ticket on his record and his bar is a completely respectable place.” The officer shook her head as if she was going to regret what she next said. “Okay we’ll move this forward so that a judge can settle matters. But we’ll want Sam to live with Brisbane as a foster child for a while before we settle things as a full adoption.”

“Fair enough.” Karen turned to Dr. Vendris. “Doctor would it be okay if Brisbane went in to sit with your patient. I promise he won’t agitate her, I think he just wants to be near her.”

The doctor nodded. “I think that it might even do her good if she knew he was there. Please go in Brisbane.”

“Thank you doctor.” Brisbane said with a smile. The Child Welfare officer had just been nailed to the wall with her own words. Between that and the suicide note a judge would just about have to let him become Sam’s father.

Sam woke up feeling sick. She rolled over on her side and tried to vomit but there was nothing in her stomach that could come up. She rolled back on to her back and decided to open her eyes even though she already knew she’d regret it. The lights were too bright and hurt.

‘And I thought getting drunk off of rum and Cokes gave you a nasty hangover.’ She thought with a groan.

“Hey there kiddo. You look like death warmed over,” came Brisbane’s voice.

Sam tried to focus on the blurry face that was on her right, and then realized that someone was holding her paw. “Brisbane? Is that really you?”

“Yeah Sam, it’s really me. I’m really here.” He gave her paw a gentle squeeze. “That wasn’t a smart thing, what you did.”

“I just couldn’t take it anymore. The pain was too much to deal with. I couldn’t turn to you. Anne and Jerry made sure of that, especially Jerry. I thought maybe the painkillers and vodka would stop the pain permanently. I hate them, they kept me from you. You, the only person to ever care about me. They kept me from you!” Sam dissolved into tears. Brisbane just sat there holding her paw and let her cry, he knew she was entitled to a good cry.

“How did you know I was here?” Sam asked once she had recovered herself a little.

“Anne called me when she found the note you had left for me.” Brisbane looked at the kid trying to figure out a good way to broach the subject of her suicide note and decided on the direct approach. “Why did you leave a note for me?”

“I wanted to let you know how I felt. You understood me. I knew you wouldn’t judge me. I thought that maybe that last note would prove to everyone that you were where I belonged.” Sam looked away determined not to cry. “Can you understand why I did it?”

Brisbane squeezed her paw again. “I understand kiddo.”

“I have to stay here for a while, don’t I?”

“Yeah, you’ll be in a psych ward for at least seventy-two hours, probably longer while things get straightened out.” Brisbane smiled at what he was about to say. “Then you come home.”

“You mean I go back to Anne and Jerry.” She said not daring to hope that she had heard right.

Brisbane shook his head. “You didn’t hear me right. I said you’re coming home. My home. I’m adopting you. The suicide note was the final straw; it proved who you wanted as a father.”

“You mean you’ll be my dad!?” Sam couldn’t believe her ears; she had a father for the first time in her life.

“A judge has to give the final approval but I finally got Child Welfare to back down and see my side of things. They were going to block it because I’m male but the

officer said that in front of my lawyer which was a big mistake. Talk about a sexual discrimination case if there ever was one.” Brisbane grinned at her. “The first thing we’re going to do as a family is look for a house. A big house, one with a yard. There are a few in the neighborhood where the Mystic Wolf is. A couple are fixer uppers, but I know how to use a hammer and saw so we’ll get a nice place.”

Sam shook her head, which she instantly regretted. “I don’t care where we live, as long as I have you for a dad.”

“Well before the adoption goes through Child Welfare wants you to live with me on a trial basis for a while. During that time they’ll be checking in on us to make sure everything is going well. They’ll be making sure you’re being taken care of and not abused. Since by their way of figuring things I might take sexual advantage of you.”

Sam looked disgusted. “How could they even think that of you. You’re the nicest guy in the world.”

Brisbane shook his head. “It more has to do with males in general as opposed to just me. There are some real sickos out there who would adopt a girl your age just to sexually abuse her.”

Sam sat up quickly, and just as quickly regretted it as she fell back on to the raised bed. “You wouldn’t do that to me, I know that. If you had wanted to do that to me you wouldn’t have turned me over to Child Welfare.”

Brisbane grinned at the sick raccoon. “Well living on the street for over a year taught you something. You’re a pretty good judge of character.”

Sam smiled weakly. “I had to learn fast after nearly getting raped on the streets a couple of times by Johns. You’re different, you’re nice and caring.”

“Well you should get some rest; according to your doctor you’re lucky to be alive. Don’t worry I’ll stay right here with you.” He patted her paw gently, and then just held it in both of his.

“Thanks dad.” Sam quickly fell back to sleep with a smile on her face.

Brisbane leaned over and kissed her forehead. “Sleep sweet kiddo.”

Half an hour went by before Karen entered the room. She looked at the sleeping form of Sam with Brisbane silently watching over her.

“How is she doing?” Karen asked in a soft whisper.

“She’s doing better. I think knowing that she’s going to be adopted by me is going to help her get through this.” He said with out turning his attention away from Sam. Then something sparked in his memory. “Karen. Why did you happen to have that mini-cassette recorder with you?”

Karen smiled. “I figured that the Child Welfare officer might slip up and say something that would be useful for us. I usually have one with me so I can go over conversations again and again if something didn’t seem right the first time. A slip of the tongue can mean worlds. My brother is a cop; he was the one who gave me the idea for it.”

“Well whatever the reason I’m glad you did. Thank you, for everything.”

“Don’t thank me just yet. We still have to see the judge. Thankfully Sam will be able to testify as to where she wants to be placed. All in all though, everything looks solid.” Karen’s smile faded for a second. “I’ve been talking to Dr. Vendris and he wants Sam to spend some time in a psych ward, a week or so after she gets a clean bill of health here.”

The giant nodded, this wasn’t a surprise. “It’s standard procedure in a case like this. Sam attempted suicide; she’ll have to spend at least seventy-two hours in a hospital to make sure she isn’t a danger to herself. Thankfully we know the surface reason as to why she attempted suicide, but there is a deeper reason that needs to be addressed.”

“The abuse.”

“That, but the main thing was finding out her mother had loved her enough to fill out a missing persons report for her. That conflicted majorly with Sam’s perception of her mother. If she hadn’t found out about that report she probably wouldn’t have attempted suicide.” Brisbane sighed, he turned his attention back to Sam. “You poor thing. Love can be the most destructive emotion out there, and you got too much of the wrong kind at the very worst time.”

“I’m going to get going. I’ll call you tomorrow so we can start getting things ready to go before the judge.”

If Brisbane heard he didn’t show it, all of his focus was on the raccoon who was soon going to be his daughter.

Sam had been in the psych ward for seven days and still hated it. She wasn’t near Brisbane though he had visited her every day, and four days ago his cousin, Sigurd had come with a stack of manga of all sorts of stories. Hopefully she’d be out before she got through them all. She was looking forward to house hunting with her new father, who had brought pictures of seven houses that he was going to have her look at when she got out. But now it was time for a visit with the idiot psychologist.

Dr. Mallory flipped through a notebook for an empty page. He then turned his attention on Sam. “So how are you feeling today?”

Sam looked at the ceiling and sighed. “Like I want out. I want fresh air. I’m fucking sick and tired of being stuck here. What’s it going to take for you to let me out?”

“We have to get at the real reason you tried to kill yourself. We must set you on a path towards mental health, only then can we let you go.” The wolf was used to this out of his young patients. Most of them just wanted their freedom.

Sam stood up so fast that she knocked over the chair she had been sitting on. She walked into the far corner and spoke with her back to the doctor. “I’ve told you why I tried to off myself! I found out that my fucking bitch of a mother loved me. Isn’t that good enough for you?”

“Love is usually such a positive emotion why did your mother’s make you want to kill yourself?”

Sam stalked back over to the table and slammed her fists on it. “Did your mother ever let someone pay to fuck you?” She asked in a low snarl.

“Well no...”

“If she had, you’d know why her love would hurt so much.” She then got ready to hit him with another nasty rhetorical question. “Have you ever found someone who you could love and trust only to be forcibly pulled away and prevented from seeing them?”

The psychologist had dealt with this sort of thing before, but not from someone who could pull out this kind of rage. “I don’t think...”

“No you don’t fucking think. I found safety, and then I was pulled away from it. I was kept from going back to the first place I had ever found love and safety. Do you know what safety is for me?” She didn’t let Dr. Mallory get a word in before she answered her own question. “For me safety and love are found in the form of a giant of a wolf. One that came running when he found out that I was in the hospital. The one that visits everyday for as long as he can. A wolf that threatened bodily harm to anyone who’d dare hurt me. Brisbane is the first person to ever show me real kindness, who wasn’t in the same position that I was in.

“On the streets I met kids who had run away from their homes and foster homes because they had been abused. I met a girl who was trying to turn tricks to get cash for food, but couldn’t because her foster father had burned her face with cigarettes. She was put in that situation by the same authorities that took me from Brisbane. I only hope that there are more people out there like my father who will take pity on kids like me. Is that what you’re looking for? I wasn’t crazy, only desperate.”

The psychologist hated hearing this type of story time and time again, though Sam was one of the worst. “So what you’re saying is that you have no reason to hurt yourself anymore.”

Sam sighed in exasperation. “Now that I have a real father I have no desire to hurt myself. If I was taken away from him again, and kept away, I’d run back to him and to hell with the system.”

“Did Brisbane ever touch you?”

The psychologist found himself on the floor after Sam had backhanded him with the force of pure rage. Two orderlies were on her in an instant.

“You fucking bastard!” She screamed. “How dare you even ask that about my dad!?”

Mallory waved off the orderlies. “That’s okay, you can let her go. I think I deserved a piece of that.”

Sam shrugged off the arms of the two furs that were still holding her. “Damn fucking straight you did! My father is a good fur. He’d kill anyone who abused me, he’s not about to do it himself.”

The wolf righted his chair and sat back down at the table. “I’m sorry but I had to ask that question. People who have been abused will often look for a situation in which they’ll be abused again. No one really knows why that is, but it is unfortunately the norm.”

Sam sat back down facing the psychologist. “I ran away from abuse, I’m not about to go looking for it. The whole reason I wanted to stay with Brisbane when Child Welfare came to take me away, was that I knew I wouldn’t be abused. I ran into several kids while I was on the street who had been abused by foster parents. I didn’t want to run the risk of being abused, not when I found some place that was safe.

“When I was taken away Brisbane told the officer that if he heard anything bad was happening he’d pursue his own sense of justice. If Brisbane was going to abuse me he would never have called Child Welfare. I don’t want to go to an abuser I want to go home to love.”

“Is love a complex emotion for you?”

Sam tilted her head back to look at the ceiling. She thought about her answer carefully before she replied. “I guess it is. Before I ran away I stayed with my mother not because I loved her, but because I didn’t have anywhere else to go. Then I got raped by one of my mother’s Johns and I realized that I needed to escape from a mother who wouldn’t protect me. When I met my father, I found someone who I could trust, and I felt something I had never felt before, every time I was around him I felt warm and safe. Never before had I met someone I knew instinctively I could trust. He brought me to his place, made me a great meal, let me sleep in a bed with clean sheets, something that I had never had before. He even took me shopping for new clothes. He did this not because he wanted something out of me but because he is a good fur. I then realized how simple love could be.”

Sam paused so long that the psychologist was about to interrupt her train of thought when she started speaking again. “Then I was told my mother had filed a missing persons report for me, and that shattered my world. In my old world my mother barely tolerated my existence. She let one of her Johns use me so she’d have some extra money for more crack. I knew from that point on that to her I’d just be a way to get extra money. She’d be able to get more money providing the instant family that some guys like so much. She’d give me to them so they could pretend that they were fucking their own daughter. Talk about sick huh. When I ran away I thought she’d forget about me and quickly get on with her life. Then someone from Child

Welfare showed me the missing persons report, and everything fell apart. She had cared enough to have the police try to find me. I hated her for what she let that bastard John of hers do to me, but when I found out that she was dead and that she had loved me it hurt. The pain was like someone stabbing you in the heart and every time you think about them they give the knife another twist.

“The pain went straight down to my soul. When I first found out about the report I ran to Brisbane so I could talk to someone who I knew cared about me. He told me that the pain would get easier to bear but that it would always be there. Had I been able to keep in contact with him I would have been able to talk it over every time the pain came. But when my foster parents kept me from him I had no one to turn to and the pain got worse.”

The psychologist nodded. “You let it build up.”

Sam shivered and hugged herself tightly, rocking slightly. “I had no way to release it. I had no one I could trust to talk to. Everyday the pain got worse. I had to escape the pain so I did the only logical thing, I took painkillers, as many, and as strong as I could find. My foster mother had a bad back so she was on prescription pain killers, so I took those and since alcohol also numbs pain I drank Jerry’s vodka. I knew that would put a permanent end to the pain.”

The wolf waited for a long while before speaking to make sure that Sam was done. “Do you regret what you did?”

“Hell fucking no.” Sam snorted. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m glad I didn’t die, but it did show those fucking bastards at Child Welfare where I belonged. Now I’m going to a place where I can talk with someone I love about the past and dull the pain.”

“Is Brisbane going to have you see a psychologist after you get out?”

Sam shook her head. “Dad knows that what I need most of all is family that I can talk to. He has a Masters in psycho therapy so if he feels that I need a therapist later on I’m sure he’ll send me to one. But right now I don’t think I need one. I just need a family.”

“Is that what you’re really after? A family?”

Sam sighed again. “Of course I’m after a family. I’ve never had one until I met my dad and he showed me what one can be like. He gave me unconditional love, and isn’t that what families are supposed to give you?”

Sam watched as a new girl was led sullenly into the psych ward. The girl's appearance really caught her attention. The new girl was obviously an albino fox, the pink eyes were a dead give away. She had cut her hair into a spiked mohawk which was dyed black halfway up, plus she had dyed a harlequin mask onto her face. Her clothes were no less distinct; she was wearing black shorts with torn fishnets underneath, combat boots, a spiked biker jacket with kanji painted in red on the back, a tank top with a picture of a bloody rose painted on it, a spiked collar, fingerless gloves, and chains were hanging off her everywhere. In short the girl screamed punk-goth. This new girl didn't seem to be paying any real attention about anything until they started taking her jacket, boots, gloves, and collar, then the screaming started.

"I don't belong here you fucking bastards! There's nothing wrong with me!"

The orderlies weren't going to put up with this and Sam knew it. One held her tight while two others pulled all offending articles off of her. "This is standard procedure for someone coming here, now stop making a fuss."

As soon as the first boot came off the orderly taking it got kicked in the face. "I'll make you regret taking my stuff you fucking cock suckers!"

"That's it! You're going in lock down!" After they finished removing all offending articles accompanied by lots of screaming, kicking, punching, and biting they dragged her into a room and locked it until the girl calmed down.

Sam went up to one of the orderlies and jabbed a thumb in the direction of the lock down room. "What's with her?"

The orderly shrugged. "Parents say she's a suicide risk."

Sam merely nodded and went back over to the couch to continue reading a manga.

After a few hours they opened the door they had locked the new girl behind. The vixen stalked out, shaking with barely suppressed rage. She dropped heavily into the chair across from Sam cursing under her breath.

Sam decided the best approach to deal with her was to come at it sideways. "Goth or punk?"

The fox looked up at her surprised. “What?”

“I thought I was pretty clear. Are you a punk or a goth, or are you somewhere in between?”

The fox snorted a laugh. “Both, not that my parents get it.”

Sam smiled, this girl she could probably relate to, she shouldn't be here any more than herself. “So you're a suicide risk, right? At least that's what your parent's think.”

That got the fox to laugh out loud. “My parents are totally fucking clueless. I start wearing black all the time and they freak. At first they blamed themselves thinking that they weren't giving me enough attention, so they start smothering me. Next I cut my hair into the mohawk and dye the harlequin mask on, and I'm in counseling, because 'I have serious issues.' The straw that broke the camel's back was the jacket.”

“I saw that. What did the back say? I mean my new uncle could probably tell me, he knows Japanese. Or was that written in Chinese?”

The fox smiled some more, now knowing she had a friend here at least. “It is Japanese. It says 'Tranquility in Death.' My parents are from Japan and they totally flipped. They're positive that I'm going to kill myself so that was it, so they stuck me in this place.”

Sam walked over to the fox and stuck out her hand. “The name's Sam and I shouldn't be here either, even though I made a damn good try at getting a slab in the morgue.”

“Shit, you're not kidding? You actually tried to kick it?” Then the fox realized that Sam had introduced herself and she had yet to do so. “I'm Kukiko by the way.”

“The reason I did it is complicated, but the results were great.” Sam sat on the arm of the chair Kukiko was sitting in. “Here's the short. I got into a real bad situation awhile back and I wasn't allowed to talk to the guy who had gotten me out of it. I got some news that really fuckin' hurt and I couldn't handle it so I tried my damndest to kill myself. Bottle of pills and a bottle of vodka. Anyways it turns out that the guy who had helped me had been trying to adopt me. The suicide attempt forced the paw of Child Welfare and he gets to adopt me. So I get a new dad who totally kicks ass.”

Kukiko laughed. “Sweet for you. My parents suck. I can’t wait to hit eighteen, then I’m out of the house and on my own.”

“How old are you?” Sam asked.

“Sixteen. Can’t wait to get a job so I can get a car. I even have one picked out.”

“So cool. What kind?”

The white vixen grinned. “A converted hearse. I found a good deal on one.”

“No shit? A genuine corpse-mobile? That’s totally sick!” Sam said amazed. “Let me guess you want to work in a funeral home when you get older?”

“Actually I have no idea what I want to do with my life. I love music, I play guitar and bass so I’d kind of like to do that.”

“Hell anything’s better than what I had to do to survive for far too long of a time.” Sam said lowering her head.

“What was that?”

“I was turning tricks on the street for almost a year and a half. The last time I tried to sell myself was when I met my dad. He took me home, and showed me that there are nice people in the world. That’s why I think he’s so damn cool. He took in a streetwalker and now he’s adopting me.”

Kukiko covered one of Sam’s paws with one of her own. “Shit that’s heavy. You got screwed.” The fox winced at her own words. “Sorry, bad choice of words. So he’s adopting you? I bet you can’t wait to get out of here then.”

“I’m sure I’ll be out of here soon.” Sam sighed. “As I said I’m not crazy, then again most of the idiots here aren’t either, they’re just whiny little shits without any real problems. Of course we got a few who are totally screwy, a schizo, and a bipolar nut job. They’re total messes so I’d stay away from them.”

“Well hopefully I’ll get out of here soon too.” Kukiko said. “I’m not a mental case either; my parent’s just don’t understand me.”

“Hey I got an idea!” Sam smiled. “If the doctors give you static about your appearance demand a second opinion.”

“Where would I get a second opinion from?” Kukiko asked skeptically. “All the doctors here would be consulting with each other, wouldn’t they? They’d all work out an opinion together and I’ll be screwed if they don’t believe I’m not a threat.”

“Well I happen to know the perfect therapist who would understand you.” Sam couldn’t keep the happiness out of her voice. She knew she could help her new friend.

“Spill it girl, I want out of here. I just know that when my parents bring me new clothes tomorrow that they’ll have bought pastels for me, and I don’t think I can survive in pink and lavender.”

“Then you’re going to love this.” Sam leaned in to whisper in her friend’s ear. “My new dad, his name’s Brisbane, is a licensed therapist. He’s spent years as a professional drink slinger so he’s seen all sorts of furs. If the doctors don’t see things your way then demand that they let you meet with him for a second opinion. I’m sure he’ll realize that you’re just trying to express yourself.”

Kukiko was all smiles. “Do you really think it could work?”

“Shit why not?” Sam said seriously. “He likes helping people. You’re not a suicide risk, even I can tell that. If you were really suicidal you wouldn’t have fought the way you did. You would have simply allowed yourself to be put anywhere. I saw one waste of air come in here who had made a serious attempt at suicide. He was a shell, there was nothing there. He could have been a puppet with as much independent movement as he showed.”

“That would be great. I want to be here as little as possible. Hey after we’re both out of here we need to hook up, you’d be fun to hang with.”

Sam was sitting on the couch in the day room. It was late and the lights had been dimmed slightly. “The Sword in the Stone” was playing on the TV but only a couple of the teens were watching it. The rest were in their rooms either reading or quietly listening to radios they’d gotten as privileges for good behavior. Sam had one

such radio but she wanted to watch the movie for now. Everything was going relatively well until Max dropped down next to her on the couch.

“Hey Sam. How ‘bout a date when we’re both out of here?” The weasel asked.

“Forget it Max. Not interested.” As far as Sam was concerned he was just a spoiled, rich kid who attempted suicide for attention.

“Aw come on. What’s one little date going to hurt?”

“Are you deaf you fucking shit head? I said ‘not interested.’ Now piss off I’m trying to watch the movie.” Sam didn’t like Max. In fact none of the other teenagers in the ward liked the jerk.

“Why won’t you go on a date with me? I can pay you.”

“I’d never ...” Was as far as Sam got.

“Don’t give me that shit. You told all of us that you used to. I’d be more than happy to pay to roll you.” Max said leaning in close to Sam.

“I gave that up jack ass. Now back off before you get hurt.”

“Don’t back talk to me. Haven’t you heard? The customer’s always right, whore.” Max reached out a paw and grabbed Sam’s chest.

Sam screamed, pulled back her fist and then slammed it into Max’s nose sending a spray of blood flying. Max fell back, the middle of his back hitting the arm of the couch which he then slid off of onto the floor. Two of the orderlies came running over when they heard the scream.

“What’s going on here?”

“That fucking whore punched me!” Max yelled trying to pull himself off the floor, one paw clamped over his bleeding nose.

“Of course I did you fucker! You grabbed my tits!” She started making a move towards the weasel hoping to get in a few more shots when an orderly grabbed her.

The other orderly grabbed Max by the back of his shirt and pulled him up onto his feet. “Okay you two,” one of the orderlies said, trying to take control of the situation, “what happened?”

Sam and Max both started yelling at the same time trying to get the first word in. The orderly let them yell for about half a minute before telling them to both shut up. “Okay Max you first.”

“I just sat on the couch next to her and tried to start up a pleasant conversation with her, and then that fucking cunt punched me in the nose.” Max snarled through the blood.

“You lying mother-fucking asshole!” Sam screamed, trying to get out of the orderlies grip so she could get a few more licks in on Max. “That bastard offered to pay me for sex, and when I said no he grabbed my tits. Of course I punched him, and I’ll do it again if you’d just let me go.”

“Cool it Sam. We’ve got cameras in the day room, we can go back five minutes and see what happened.” The orderly said in a calming voice that was barely registering with the irate raccoon. “Max. If what Sam says is true you’re in it deep.”

Max dropped out of the orderlies grip. “Ah shit! I forgot about the fucking cameras.”

“I take it that means what Sam says is true?”

“Yeah, yeah. You got me. The whore is telling the truth.” Max said in a half whisper, not looking up.

“Call me a ‘whore’ again you bastard and I’ll rip your fucking balls off!” Sam screamed.

By this time the other teens in the ward had come out of their rooms to see what was causing all the noise. “What’s going on?” Asked Kukiko.

“Nothing that concerns you,” said the orderly, “now I want everyone back in their rooms. And I do mean now.

“Now as far as you go Sam I want you to go to bed. I’m not taking away your radio since you were defending yourself.”

“Before I go to bed,” Sam said, “I want to use one of my chits for a phone call.”

The orderly knew that meant trouble. He had seen Sam’s soon to be father, and the guy scared the hell out of him. “Okay Sam it’s up to you. You’ve got ten minutes.”

Sam walked stiffly over to where the phones were. She hated Max. She thought that when Brisbane had told her that he’d adopt her that she’d never have to go through this bullshit again. Well she was going to get out of this one way or another.

After she dialed the phone it rang twice before it was answered. “Hello Brisbane speaking.”

“Dad it’s me. I really need to talk to you.”

Brisbane was surprised, Sam had never called him at night before since he saw her every day. “Is something wrong kiddo?”

“You could say that,” Sam sighed. “This jerk named Max made a move on me, and when I told him to piss off he grabbed my chest.”

“HE WHAT?!” Brisbane roared. “I’ll come down there and rip his arms off!”

“Calm down dad.” Sam didn’t want her dad going off half-cocked and doing something stupid. “He’s in lock down right now, and the head of the ward will decide what to do with him in the morning. I just want you to press to get me out of here as soon as possible.”

Brisbane took a couple of deep, calming breaths. “I can do that short stuff. I’ll meet with your psychologist and a Child Welfare officer tomorrow and get you out of there as soon as possible. Anyways, you’re not crazy so you shouldn’t be in there.”

Sam was relieved that her dad was going to work at getting her out of this place. “Thanks dad. That’s all I needed to hear from you. I can’t wait to see you in the morning.”

May 2002

Brisbane, Sam, the officer from Child Welfare, and Dr. Mallory were all sitting down around a conference table. Mallory was looking nervous; it was the first time during his four years of working at the hospital that a patient had been sexually assaulted by another patient.

Brisbane looked pissed for the simple reason that he was. “Let’s start with the basics. Does Sam really belong here?”

Dr. Mallory looked from Brisbane to Sam and back again. “Well it’s hard to say. We have a lot of things to go over. She still has a lot of issues to deal with. I don’t think she’s quite ready to leave the center.”

“That’s bullshit.” Sam snarled. “I’m perfectly fine. The only issues I have to deal with I can talk to my dad about.”

“You still need professional counseling. There are deeper problems that you need to deal with.” The psychiatrist was the kind of fur that didn’t like letting go of patients unless he was absolutely sure that they wouldn’t be back.

“There are no deeper issues! All of my issues stem from my mother’s neglect. We’ve gone round and round that topic, it’s all talked out, there’s nothing left for me to add.”

The child welfare officer stepped in at this point. “Doctor, is there any way we can come to a compromise? I’ve looked over her records and Sam seems to be doing fine.”

“Thank you!” Sam exclaimed throwing her paws up. “I want out!”

Brisbane looked thoughtfully at the doctor for a second. “What if Sam was put in an out patient set up. She’s no longer on suicide watch and she really should get settled in with me.”

“I don’t know if that would be the best thing for her. She’d miss out on a lot of one on one therapy time.”

Sam scowled, she had gotten very good at it over the last couple of weeks. “Therapy is just a waste of my damn time. You’re just going to ask me the same damn questions and I’m just going to give you the same damn answers.”

“Out patient does seem like a reasonable compromise. What things would she still be participating in?” Asked child welfare.

“She would be doing some school work. Though since she’s not in school that does make things difficult. There would be group sessions...”

“Yeah. Listening to whiny little shits going, ‘Oh woe is me. My parents don’t pay enough attention to me’.” Sam exaggerated the final bit with eyes as wide as possible and paws clasped together. “The only person I can come close to relating with is Kukiko, since there is no reason for her to be here either. Even she can’t fully relate to me since she didn’t spend a year and a half on the streets.”

“There are the social activities.” The Dr. Mallory continued as if he hadn’t heard Sam.

“More like activities you hear about doing at summer camp.” Sam snorted. “If I have to make one more fuckin’ picture frame I’m going to use it to bash your face in. It’s all bullshit. The games are ridiculous and the art projects are moronic. I want out.”

Brisbane put a paw on his daughter’s shoulder and gave it a slight squeeze to assure her that he’d get her out of the worst of it. “I’ll make you a deal Doctor. I’ll have Sam see a psychologist outside of the hospital.” He pushed on before Dr. Mallory could protest. “I’ll have them share records with you. I’ll also get her private tutoring so she can be caught up in time for the start of next school year.”

Mallory stroked his chin for a second in thoughtful silence. “Okay I’ll accept that.”

“I have a question,” came from child welfare. “Where would Sam be while you were at work?”

Brisbane shrugged. “At the Mystic Wolf. She can do her homework in a booth or in my office. It’s not as if I’m going to let her drink anything stronger than soda while she’s there. The food is healthy, unlike typical bar food, so she’ll eat decently. From what she tells me lunch around here is sadly lacking in taste, so no loss there.”

“But will she have any interaction with kids her own age?” Asked Mallory.

“My cousin teaches martial arts. There are plenty of students Sam’s age in the classes. She’ll be getting exercise and socialization at the same time. There is nothing here that she can’t get outside of the hospital.”

Mallory sighed reasoning that he was beat. “Okay I’ll sign Sam’s release. As long as you keep up your part of the bargain I’ll accept your proposal.”

As Sam packed her few belongings away Kukiko knocked on the doorframe to her room. “Hey Sam. Going somewhere?”

“I’m getting sprung! Dad came up with a solution to my situation that satisfied both Child Welfare and Dr. Dipshit Mallory. I go home in a couple of hours.”

“That’s great!” Kukiko hugged Sam tightly. “I’ll miss you.”

When Sam freed herself of Kukiko’s hug, she reached into her pocket and pulled out a piece of paper. “Here’s my new phone number. Give me a call if you need help getting out of here, and promise me you’ll stay in touch.”

The vixen hugged Sam again. “Of course I’ll keep in touch. You’re probably the best friend I’ve ever had. Good luck with your new father; he seems like a great guy.”

“Hey he took me in when I was a streetwalker. What more could I ask for? Don’t worry about me.” For the next fifteen minutes they packed Sam’s bag, Sam giving Kukiko several of the manga that Sigurd had brought her.

Brisbane stuck his head in the room. “You ready to go kiddo?”

“Yeah dad.” She turned to Kukiko and gave her one last hug. “See you on the outside.”

“See you on the outside.”

Sam climbed into Brisbane's SUV. "So we're going home?"

"We will soon, but before we do I have to introduce you to the Mystic Wolf."

They drove to the bar with Sam asking questions about it, which Brisbane answered with just an odd smile. They pulled into the parking lot and before Sam undid her seatbelt Brisbane looked her hard in the eyes.

"No matter what you see here don't be scared, there is nothing to fear in the Mystic Wolf."

Sam swallowed nervously. "What do you mean?"

"You'll see in a few minutes what I mean. However I want you to promise me that you won't talk about this to anyone outside of those you see in the bar."

This statement from Brisbane made Sam all the more nervous but she trusted her dad completely. "I promise."

"Okay. I'm going to hold you to that promise." He then smiled warmly. "Let's go in kiddo."

Sam stepped out of the SUV and followed Brisbane to the door of the tavern and looked at the stained glass. "Well the door is beautiful." She smiled weakly.

Brisbane snorted a laugh, opened the door and motioned Sam to go in. The first sight that greeted Sam was a dragon sitting at the bar mulling over its own thoughts with a pint.

She looked back at her dad very shaken. "What is this?"

"This is where the magickal realm meets the mortal realm. Remember what I said, nothing will hurt you here." He gave her a slight push in.

Sam looked around in amazement, everything was so beautiful. She hadn't known what to expect, but this would have been the last. A nine-tailed kitsune walked, almost floating, up to the two of them. "Brisbane, is this the young lady you've been telling us about? She's quite pretty."

Sam blushed under her fur. "I'm not pretty."

The kitsune smiled, "don't sell yourself short young one. I have lived over five thousand years so I speak from experience. While you might not be as pretty as some on the outside, you do have a very beautiful soul."

"Thank you Takeshi. I don't think Sam is used to compliments."

"Well you know me Brisbane. I only give compliments to those who deserve them. Now young lady why don't you join me for a drink? I'm sure you have some interesting tales to tell of your world."

Sam looked at Brisbane. "I don't think I have anything to tell you that you would find interesting."

Takeshi smiled widely. "Ah once again you sell yourself short as so many young ones do. Everyone has a story and I like to hear them."

Brisbane shook his head. "Maybe later my friend. Let her get used to the place first."

The kitsune smiled again. "I have plenty of time to wait. I'm immortal, so time is the least of my concerns. Sam, my dear, when you feel like indulging an old fur please come talk to me, I would love to hear your story."

Sam nodded and smiled. "I will Mr. Takeshi."

"Please dear one, it's simply Takeshi." He then made his way back to his table leaving them alone.

"That was different." Sam said. "He seemed genuinely interested in me."

Brisbane smiled, "he's interested in everyone's stories. I think he lives to hear them. He's quite powerful, and can do practically anything he wants to, but all he seems to want to do is listen. He's one of the more normal people here."

Sam looked around a bit. "Dad, what is going on here?"

"It's actually quite simple. With some help I managed to put a small break in the barrier between two realms, the magickal and the mortal. Now I serve food and drinks to customers from both sides."

Sam started wandering around looking at everything. The lunch crowd had already been and gone. There were only a few customers scattered throughout the tavern. There was a large red wolf sitting at the bar staring sightlessly into a drinking horn. The wolf was easily as large as Brisbane and leaning against his stool was a large hammer. At a booth there was a black feline wearing a tweed jacket with leather patches at the elbows pouring over a stack of papers. There was a fairie and a dragon playing chess at a table.

There were, of course, more customers but she noticed something at the end of the long, quartz bar that caught her attention. “Dad what’s with the target at the end of the bar?”

“I’ll show you.” He walked up to the bar. “Charlie mix me a Dragon’s Breath.”

The bear at the bar turned round and pulled a bottle off the shelf and poured two shots of high proof liquor into a shot glass. Putting the bottle back he ducked under the bar and pulled out a small jar and put a small dash of powder into the glass, turning the clear liquor blood red. “Here you go boss. One Dragon’s Breath.”

Brisbane showed the glass to Sam. “Now watch this.” The giant walked to the end of the bar until he was about twelve feet from the target. He slammed down the drink, inhaled deeply, and exhaled hard at the target. A long jet of fire exploded from his mouth blasting the target. “That’s what the target’s for kiddo.”

Sam blinked, she couldn’t believe what she had just seen; her father had actually exhaled fire. “That’s unbelievable! What’s in that?”

“A mixture of Everclear and powdered dragon’s blood,” Brisbane shrugged. “It’s an easy drink to make when you have the ingredients.”

“Dragons’ blood?! Where do you get that?”

“I’ve got a couple of donors who give it for free drinks. Dragons may be rich but some of them are really stingy about their money.” He nodded towards the dragon at the bar. “Isn’t that right Ker-Faddara?”

The dragon’s response was a raised middle finger.

“Don’t mind him; he’s been cranky since his divorce. The princess got half his horde.” Brisbane said with a straight face.

“He was *married* to a princess???”

“Lots of princesses on the other side, mostly of the fey variety. This one just happened to have a very good lawyer, so Ker-Faddara got screwed.”

“Next time I see that lawyer, I’m going to eat him,” muttered the dragon.

“That would require you spending more than a couple of hours outside of the bar a day. You get here before we open, and usually I have to drag your unconscious body out of here when we close up for the night. You’ve turned into an alcoholic.”

Ker-Faddara lunged at Brisbane, mouth wide open. The giant wolf took a half step back and cold cocked the dragon. Ker-Faddara hit the ground with a loud thud that shook the nearby tables. No one even bothered to look up.

“Charlie, give me a Burner.”

Sam couldn’t believe what had just happened, her dad had just punched out a dragon. “What’s a Burner?” she asked.

“It is the quickest way to sober a person up; it is also pretty uncomfortable while it does its work.”

Charlie put a shot glass that contained blue, liquid fire on the bar. Brisbane tilted Ker-Faddara’s head back and poured the fire down his throat and shut the dragon’s jaws and held them firmly. The dragon’s scales started glowing red and smoke started pouring from his nostrils.

Ker-Faddara’s eyes popped open and he started thrashing, trying to throw the wolf off. Brisbane merely straddled the dragon’s neck and planted a knee right between his wings. “Quit thrashing before you break something!”

The smoke just kept coming. “Damn it Charlie! How much has he had?”

The bear shrugged. “It’s hard to say boss. He’s been holding it well until he took a jump at you. Also he’s been moving around to different tables so none of the waitresses have been able to keep track.”

And still the smoke kept coming. Ker-Faddara wasn’t struggling so much now that most of Brisbane’s considerable weight was placed in a sensitive part of his back. “Gods! His blood alcohol content has got to be at least one point two. Damn it

Ker-Faddara I'm making a new rule and I don't care if it means you never come back. No more alcohol for you in this bar ever, and I mean ever. And if you are caught getting someone else to buy you a drink I'm banning your sorry ass! Permanently!"

The smoke just kept coming. Charlie looked down at the dragon not believing his eyes. "He's been smoking for over three and a half minutes. I haven't even seen a dwarf do this. What do you reckon he's at?"

The smoke tapered off after another few minutes before finally stopping. "Near as I can guess he made it to somewhere around three point four. That would have killed just about anybody; even dwarves can't take anything above one point seven with out keeling over. Trust this idiot to screw himself over this badly."

Brisbane gave Ker-Faddara's head a quick shake. "If you were like this when you were married it's no damn wonder the princess left you."

He slammed the dragon's head back into the ground knocking him out again. "Charlie, when he wakes up tell him I don't want to see him in here for a week. He's ruining the atmosphere."

Sam stared in stunned silence. Her dad had just beaten up a dragon as easily as if he had been the proverbial ninety-pound weakling. "Dad? How did you do that?"

"I've had to knock him around a couple of times before, nothing serious or I'd have kicked him out a long time ago."

"But you weren't even scared?"

Brisbane shrugged and smiled. "The idiot leads with his chin, and he's got a glass jaw. One solid punch and he goes sleepy bye. Also the magick in this place levels the playing field between mortals and the magickals, while boosting the power of the staff over both of them. It's the only thing that keeps the place from getting too rowdy. I can even take on most Gods here, there are only two beings so powerful that even this place can take them down in the slightest."

"You can fight a God here?!"

Brisbane jabbed a thumb at the giant red wolf. "That's Thor over there, Viking God of thunder and strength. I can beat him at arm wrestling here. Like most of the Gods they walk the mortal realm helping their worshipers subtly. That's the odd thing about Gods, real Gods that is. Walking down the street and you pass a beggar in ragged clothes asking for a hand out, it could be Odin who will bless those that help

him. I like to help people because I never know who I'm helping and how it may come back to help me in turn. Basically think of it as karma, always help people because it may help you eventually."

"I guess you could say that until I came here I was an atheist. I mean what kind of Christian god would let the kind of shit happen that happened to me?" Sam looked around the bar again. "I guess I'm going to have to rethink my beliefs."

Brisbane smiled. "It's okay kiddo, you don't have to worship anybody. All you have to do is accept that the Gods exist. Speaking of which there are a couple over there that would like to meet you."

Sam looked bewildered. "Gods? That want to meet me? Why?"

"Because they did me a favor on your behalf."

"What did they do?" Sam asked.

"They took care of that priest who was a customer of yours. Now come with me." Brisbane led Sam over to a table where two bears who looked like a married couple were sitting. The husband was wearing clothes like you'd expect on a Viking that were old and thread bare yet seemed more regal for it and had a patch over his left eye. The wife was wearing chain mail that was almost as beautiful as she was. "Sam, I'd like you to meet Odin and Freya."

"I remember this nice young woman." Odin said happily.

"You do?" Sam asked. "Dad told me that you took care of that priest for me. Why?"

"Here sit down." Odin said pulling over a chair. "As to why? It was because I was honor bound since I owed you a favor."

Sam looked confused. "You owed me a favor? Why? What did I do for you that made you owe me a favor?"

"Because," said Odin, his form starting to dissolve, "you shared a sandwich with me." Where there had been a bear there was now an old, mangy fox in beat up army fatigues. Where Odin's ash walking staff had been there was a pair of battered crutches.

"You?!" Sam exclaimed surprised. "I remember you sitting on the sidewalk near a gas station with a cardboard sign saying, 'please help.' That was you? Why?"

Odin turned back into a bear before replying. "Because it's how I find people to help. I help those who perform acts of kindness to those who have suffered through life. But I'm not though the only one to help you am I Freya?"

Odin's wife smiled. "Very true. I helped you as well."

Sam looked puzzled. "How?"

Freya smiled kindly. "I put a thought into your mind, the one that brought you here. The one that found you a dad."

"You sent me here to meet Brisbane?"

"Oh yes. I help warriors, and you survived a daily battle living on the streets, making you a true warrior."

Sam couldn't believe her ears, she had been helped by Gods for reasons that seemed important only to them. "I don't know what to say other than thank you."

Odin shrugged still smiling. "A thank you is all we need. We're not like that second rate punk deity Jehovah. He's completely random and does little to help his followers except the scum who corrupt his teachings."

Sam looked puzzled. "Who's Jehovah?"

Odin and Freya threw back their heads and laughed loudly. "Jehovah is the Biblical name for the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic God." Odin said once he could breathe again.

"He should be known as the patron God of public relations agents." Freya snarled. "Those texts he inspired were pure works of self-serving fiction. Then he became one sadistic bastard, starting holy wars amongst his followers, as well as having them kill off the worshippers of other Gods. His mother, Lilith, is truly pissed at him. He had his worshipers demote her from his mother, to his wife, then to the first woman he created, and finally he had them write her out completely. He'd never come here, every God here would be more than happy to beat him to a pulp, and Lilith has given Brisbane orders to let her know if he shows up so she can deal with him herself."

Odin smiled as well. "Any God who tells his followers that only he can punish the guilty but does nothing to stop those who commit acts of pure evil in this world is not worthy of worship. Our followers will rise up again someday and overthrow his churches, temples, and mosques."

Freya raised a hand to sign a cut to the topic. "So how have you been since you tried to commit suicide?"

"You know about that?"

"Of course." Freya said. "Brisbane was as confusing as Loki in his emotions. First he was pissed, then ecstatic, then pissed, then ecstatic. Well you get the idea."

"Well," Sam started unsure where to begin. "I spent two-and-a-half weeks in the hospital being generally pissed off and frustrated, since all I wanted to do was go home. I met a great new friend who shouldn't have been in the hospital either. And last night this little shit groped me. That incident was the final straw and dad got me out of the hospital. So here I am."

"Do you want help in settling matters with this, 'little shit', as you put it?" Freya asked.

"Nah. I've dealt with worse and I got the chance to get even at the time." Sam said with a smile. "I drew blood so I feel okay about it."

"Then we are settled on the matter." Odin said looking around for a waitress.

"Lori!" He said when he spotted the feline. "More ale here if you'd be so kind."

Lori walked over and looked at Sam. "You must be the boss' new kid. What can I get you?"

"A Coke would be great." Sam said. "And you can put their drinks on my tab."

"Wouldn't dream of letting you do that." Odin objected. "We always pay for ourselves here unless it's someone from another pantheon who needs to apologize after an argument is buying."

A new thought puzzled Sam. "How do you pay anyway? I can't see you needing much use for carrying around American money on the other side of this Veil thing."

Odin shrugged. "Well I'm not totally clear on how it works but I'll explain it as best as I can. We, the people from the other side of the Veil, bring in gold. Brisbane has hired a metallurgist who checks purity and tells Brisbane what the 'market value' is. What 'market value' is I'm not sure, but it is important to Brisbane because it seems to change quite a bit. Anyways he then takes off some money from the top, part for the fee for the metallurgist as well as for selling the gold all over the country so no one gets suspicious of the amount of gold he has. Then he takes the money from the gold and puts it in something called a debit account, again the concept confuses me slightly. Then what we buy is subtracted from that debit account. There are a few other things Brisbane has had to explain to everyone who comes in here from our side of the Veil and that is the idea of a gratuity. The reason a gratuity is an odd concept for us to grasp, especially for us Gods, is that it seems like we are making sacrifices to the mortals. Brisbane cleared the matter up by explaining it as us giving the mortals a blessing for their service to us." Once again Odin shrugged.

Sam's face took on an odd expression for a few seconds trying to work out exactly how everything worked from Odin's explanation. "I think I've got it."

Odin smiled, "you know, now that I've had to explain it to another person it has become clearer to me."

Odin, Freya, and Sam made idle chit-chat for a while when a beautiful cream colored wolf with hair like spun gold, dressed as a Viking came in through the door that came from the magickal realm. She was, obviously upset, to the point of being highly pissed off. She stalked over to where Thor was sitting, turned him around so he faced her and started screaming. Every once in a while she'd emphasize her point with a hard jab in his chest with one finger. The God simply hung his head in shame and didn't even bother to try to say anything.

"What's going on?" Sam asked confused. Here she was watching a femme screaming into the face of the Viking God of Strength and all he did was hang his head in shame. In her old world if a femme tried anything like that she would have had the crap kicked out of her. Yet this wolf just took it and if anything seemed to be shrinking on the verbal assault.

Odin and Freya were trying their hardest not to burst out into full blown laughter. "That's Sif, she's Thor's wife. Apparently he forgot their anniversary again. You'd think she'd be used to it by now, or that he'd start remembering the date since this has been going on for thousands of years. But every year it's the same thing, Thor

forgets to do even as much as give her flowers and she locks him out, he comes here and starts drinking. She then finds him and the screaming begins."

"But doesn't he ever get mad enough to hit her?" Sam asked, still confused, as she watched the massive wolf get dragged out of the bar by the ear.

"He wouldn't dare, I wouldn't allow it. That and he has a thing for protecting women. Ask me about it later and I'll tell you how he came to be the patron God of young brides. It's a funny story." Odin said patting Sam on the shoulder. "But for now Freya and I need to take our leave of you so we can calm Sif down before things get out of paw."

Freya smiled at Sam as she got up as well. "Take care of yourself Sam. We come here fairly often so I'm sure we'll see you frequently."

"Thank you again Odin, Freya. Thanks for helping me out."

"You're a warrior of the world child." Freya said. "When your time comes, and I hope that it won't for a very long time, one of my valkyries will come for you."

"Err thanks. I think." Sam said cautiously, not sure what Freya had meant.

Lori stopped by with another Coke for Sam. "I see your friends have headed out. What do you think of them?"

"They seem really nice but I have to ask. Does that happen often? I mean do God's come in here a lot?"

Lori smiled as she slid into the booth across from Sam. "Constantly. The Mystic Wolf is neutral ground so even Gods from rival pantheons come in here to sort out problems between themselves. Every once in a while things will get a little rowdy, but we, the wait staff that is, are more powerful around here so we can usually break things up with out too much of the furniture being destroyed. Of course while breaking things up I've seen your father break tables by slamming people through them."

"Dad puts people through tables?" Sam laughed. "You have got to be kidding."

Lori shook her head with a smile. "Up by the neck and down through the top of the table. Makes one hell of a noise when the table breaks. We usually go through a couple of tables a month, especially when Odin and Jupiter start getting into a

shouting match. If Brisbane has to break a table the offender usually gets a temporary ban. Very few people have ever gotten permanently banned. You have to do something monumentally stupid to get that punishment.”

“How does dad make sure that the person never comes back. He’s not here all of the time.”

“It works sort of like a voodoo doll,” Lori explained. “With a small piece of the person, say a piece of fur or a drop of blood, Brisbane fashions a charm that keeps the bar from letting the person in.”

“How many people have been permanently banned?” Sam asked, curious as to how many people had pissed her dad off that badly.

Lori looked at her paw and began to tic off the people with the ASL form of counting, lipping off the names of the offenders for herself. “I think the number stands at fourteen. I could be off by one or two though.”

“What kinds of people get band?”

“Well there was one guy who groped a couple of us waitresses.” Lori grinned. “Brisbane wrenched the bastard’s arm out of its socket, and broke his jaw slamming his face into the bar, before he called the cops.”

“What happened to the guy?” Sam asked.

Lori gave her an evil grin. “Four of us pressed charges, and several Gods put the fear of themselves into him so he didn’t even think of trying to have the cops do anything to Brisbane. One look at Freya and Tyr and the bastard pissed himself.”

Lori looked at her watch and then at the other patrons in the bar. “I got to get back to work girl. If you’re still here in two hours when I get off shift I’ll come back and talk to you more.”

Sam looked around the bar as well and was amazed at how many patrons there were in the bar. There weren’t many patrons when she had first come in, but now it was starting to fill up from the last fifteen minutes when Lori had first sat down with her. “I’ll talk to you later then Lori.”

Sam went back to her people watching. After another half hour or so Brisbane came over. “You ready to head home kiddo?”

Sam shrugged trying not to seem as excited at the sound of the words ‘head home, as she really was. She was finally heading home. A real home, not a place to survive in, but a real home. “I guess I’m ready.”

“Liar,” Brisbane said with a grin, “you’ve been ready to go home since we left the hospital.”

Sam stuck her tongue out at her father. “Yeah, I’m ready to go home.” She said with a huge grin spreading across her muzzle.

Fifteen minutes later the two of them were back at Brisbane’s condo, ‘their condo’ Sam reminded herself. The place was cleaner than she remembered from her first time there. She went into the bedroom she had used her first night with her new father carrying her bag and found that it now had a small but really nice stereo in one corner on a dresser, and a small desk with a new laptop and iPod on it on the other side of the bed. When she had lived with her mother she slept on a mattress on the floor, and her clothes were simply in a pile. Now here she had a real bed and a dresser, and her own closet, she was in paradise.

“Thanks dad.” She said with a slight smile. She spun around and threw her arms around the first father she had ever known. “Thanks for every thing.”