

No Turning Back
A short story by Tygon Panthera

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The sleek body stirred. Arms and legs moved, first without a guiding mind but as the moments passed the movements became more and more coordinated. Silken bed sheets were pushed out of the way and a thickly furred tail rose, shaking lightly to chase some of the night's tangles out of the long hairs that covered it. A moment later a head rose as well and triangular ears perked up, scanning for sounds. Jirrih opened her eyes as her mind finally found it's way into awareness. Her muzzle opened in a long yawn before she looked around to find herself alone in the large bed she shared with her husband. For a moment she was confused, but then she realized that he must be up already, which was not really strange for him.

With another, smaller yawn, the vixen slowly slid out of the large bed and lightly stepped out from behind the canopy that surrounded the bed towards her dresser. She sat down in the comfortable chair and started brushing through her exquisite fur, freeing it from the tangles the night always brought. Soon she was murring softly, enjoying the sensations of the brush running through her fur. Jirrih had always enjoyed brushing herself. It left her feeling very clean and in order.

It took Jirrih almost an hour to brush through her fur, her tail and luxuriously long headfur only adding to the work, and get dressed. Wearing piece of clothing that looked pretty much like a dress incorporating a long skirt of sheer lace, but was much easier to put on, the vixen made her way through the hallways of Panthera Castle. Eventually she reached the large kitchen, where she found not only Isolde, the head chef of the Castle but also her husband, sitting at the large table that dominated the center of the room. With a nod to the female ermine at the stove, Jirrih sat down beside her husband.

“Good morning, dear,” she said in a soft voice.

“Hm? Oh, yes... good morning, dear heart,” the large feline mumbled, looking up. He obviously had not noticed her enter at all.

Jirrih had to lean back to look at the being known as Tygon, Lord Panthera or as the Spirit of Rage to others, and as ‘beloved husband’ exclusively to her. What she saw was a side of him that was not visible very often. With a body that towered most other furs by at least half a head and a massive build, he was normally an imposing, if not intimidating presence that radiated an air of full control. His attire, which was designed with the same thought in mind, only enhanced that aura.

Right now, however, he looked worn out. He was sitting on a simple kitchen chair, lightly hunched over, wearing casual clothes and holding a cup of tea in his paws. Jirrih knew that being the Spirit of Rage, her husband could take on a god and come out victorious. Seeing him like this, however, reminded the vixen that even he was still a living being that felt other emotions at times and even for him things could become overwhelming.

“Did you have a rough night?” she eventually asked, touching his arm gently.

“Sort of,” Tygon eventually replied. “Duty was calling,” he added after a sigh.

Jirrih nodded. The vixen did not fully understand what exactly the Spirits of Emotion, or Spirits of Power as they were also known, were, how they got their power, and how they came to being in the first place. However, she did know that her husband was required to try and spread the emotion he stood for.

“I almost got a skunk in an alternate Furth to slash out at her boyfriend and family,” the Spirit of Rage went on after his wife remained silent. “Her father was abusive so it was easy enough to wake rage in her. She has a strong will though,” he added with a sigh.

“So she resisted you.”

Tygon nodded. “Yes... the only thing I accomplished was making her claw her boyfriend’s back in her sleep. They blamed it on a particularly bad dream, which is not really very far from the truth.”

“How does it feel to enter another fur’s dreams?” Jirrih asked, hoping the question would distract from his failure.

“It’s not so much entering a dream but adding your own bits to it. In most cases a voice is enough. The sleeping fur’s subconscious will do the rest. I can teach you if you want to.”

“Really?”

“Sure,” Tygon replied. “It’s not that hard. Minds are very vulnerable when asleep. It might take a few years, but time is not really a problem for us.” He sighed again. “I should remember that... time is not a problem... that skunk will get more visits from her demon.”

“You don’t look like a demon to me,” Jirrih said with a smile.

“You would be surprised, dear. There are very few demons who fit into the red-skin-with-wings-and-horns cliché.”

“And what does that skunk’s demon look like?”

Tygon turned to look at his wife and for a very brief moment she had a vision of a female skunk with black fur and white stripes and black headfur almost as long as her own. She was clad in a red dress that accentuated her breathtaking figure pretty well. Long, bloody red claws extended from her fingertips and eyes just as red stared evilly at Jirrih.

As quickly as the image appeared it was gone. “Interesting,” the vixen said.

“Thanks,” her husband replied before taking another sip of his tea. “Sometimes I hate this job,” he murred.

Jirrih was about to say something when she felt a soft paw on her shoulder. As she turned her head she looked into Isolde’s smiling face. The ermine handed her a cup of nicely warmed chocolate milk, and Jirrih accepted it with a thankful nod. With her attention back on Tygon the vixen lifted the cup to her lips and took a sip. The warm liquid felt good in her mouth, the sweet and yet fresh taste caressing her tongue. Without swallowing she took another sip, enjoying the taste. However, for some reason that Jirrih had not found yet it was impossible to keep the liquid in her mouth for too long. It seemed like the taste was overloading her senses, making her swallow instinctively. She fought the urge but eventually she lost that fight. *Well one can’t always win*, the vixen mused. Suddenly her tail gave a swish and her eyes lit up.

“My Lord?” she said in a soft voice, pulling her chair a little closer to Tygon.

“Yes,” the feline replied, his ears perking up.

“Why don’t you get dressed while I ready the Grand Hall so we can dance?”

That made Tygon’s eyes light up as Jirrih’s had only a moment before. “You would do that for me?”

“Of course, my beloved husband,” the vixen murred, wrapping her arms around Tygon, who returned the embrace without hesitation. Their muzzles met as they kissed and Tygon’s body started to vibrate gently with a deep purr.

###

Panthera Castle was an imposing sight. Its many towers rising tall into the sky, it had been built into the side of a mountain so that it loomed over the surrounding landscape. Its walls were dark, as if the very light itself shied away from it and those who lived there. Decorations were sparse. Lord Panthera preferred his home simple, at least on the outside. The castle reflected its owner rather well.

The landscape that surrounded Panthera Castle, however, rather reminded one of the Lord’s wife. It was an idyllic sight, the roughness of the mountains slowly fading into gentle, grass covered valleys. The area radiated a peace and quiet that even the haunting nature of Panthera Castle could not dim. Several villages lay scattered in those valleys, lovely small settlements filled with rough, friendly furs who knew nothing of the troubles of their cousins in the big cities. They lived simple lives filled with honest, hard work and good, honest joy. Their crops grew like they had hundreds of years ago without any of the spoils of the modern worlds.

These furs looked up to Panthera Castle with respect born from the fear of the

unknown. Lord Panthera ruled over them. He owned the fields where their crops grew, the ground on which they walked and the houses they lived in. However, they rarely saw him. Every year they paid the tributes and he left them to their own devices, not interfering with their lives. Yet, now and then strange sounds would drift down the mountains from the castle, and now and then weird lights shone in the night. These were the source of the many terrifying stories that mothers used to scare their cubs into obedience. They told them of nightmarish horrors that Lord Panthera would unleash if he ever heard that there were cubs in the villages that had not finished their meal. Silly stories, perhaps, but they fulfilled their purpose.

There was one village among the many that was special. Situated in the largest valley of the area, directly beneath Panthera Castle, it was the only village with a school. Three times a week cubs and kits from the surrounding villages would take long marches to come here and learn. The school had to be in this village out of simple necessity. Panthera Castle was the only place within several hundred miles that had a library, and without books there was no teaching the little ones what they needed to know. Of course, this school was quite unlike the ones found in the large cities. There were only a few cubs to visit but those came eagerly, more than willing to have a change from their normal daily life.

Alastor Canid, a tall, elderly shepherd, had taken upon himself the duty of teaching these young furs. It was a duty he gladly fulfilled. The canine loved working with children. Their minds were open to new things and they were eager to take in what he offered. With slow movements he closed the large book he had been reading from. As he looked up he saw disappointment in the faces of the cubs. They loved it when he read to them from books about the local history. Alastor smiled.

“Do not fret, young ones,” he said with his deep, kind voice. “Next time I shall read to you about how the villagers defended their homes from the invaders from the east 200 years ago.” The cubs cheered at that as Alastor closed his eyes. *If I can bring up the courage to go up the castle and get the book I need, that is*, he added in thought. He had been up there many times before but it still sent a chill down his spine. Each time he walked the long way that led to Panthera Castle he felt as if he was walking to his doom. Step by step it became more and more difficult to make his feet move. How a nice female like Jirrih could voluntarily live in a place like that was beyond his understanding.

“Alas, it is not mine to judge neither the Lady nor the Lord,” he murmured before he spoke up again. “Free time!” he exclaimed, making the cubs cheer again. “Go outside and be merry. One hour before the midday meal. After that we shall resume our writing practices.” Within a minute the classroom was devoid of cubs. Alastor smiled as he put the heavy history book back into his bag. Tomorrow, when he went to the castle to get new books he would return this one. It was nice of Lord Panthera to allow them the use of his books without any charge. The library of Panthera Castle was amazing, a collection of knowledge second to none that the canine knew of. Sometimes he wished that he could take the cubs up there and show them this vast storehouse of books, but he dared not. He had no idea what Lord Panthera thought of such an endeavor and, more importantly, the

cubs would shake with terror once they arrived at the castle's doorstep.

Soft music reached Alastor's ears. A smile formed again on his muzzle. The old furs of the village liked to visit the school during the cub's free time to play for them. It was a lovely sight, watching the little ones jump and wag their tails in the rhythm while the elderly played on flutes or violins. Today the merriment was cut short though. Mere minutes after the music had started a high wail made Alastor look up. The playing stopped and excited, small voices chattered chaotically. The shepherd jumped up and hurried outside. The sight that greeted him made him sigh. The children were standing in a rough circle around two of them. An old fox was standing outside of that circle, clearly unsure what to do.

Alastor immediately saw that there was a fight going on or at least there had been. One of the two cubs, a wolf-boy, was lying on the ground, curled up and holding his bleeding nose. The other was a female, about half a head smaller than the wolf. She looked like a little fox with her bushy tail and pointed ears. Her face looked kinda fox-like as well, but her fur coloration was not even close to a fox's. Tannish fur covered most of her body, turning only slightly lighter on her front. A ring of black fur ran about her throat like a collar and more black fur was on her paws and feet. Her dark brown headfur was cut short, more for convenience than anything else, her black-tipped ears poking out of it. Blue-greenish eyes normally looked curiously at the world but now those eyes were wet with tears, the girl's normally beautiful face distorted with a snarl of rage.

"SHE WAS NOT!" the fox-like girl shouted at the whimpering wolf, her fingers hooked, small, sharp claws poking out of the tips.

Alastor shook his head before he moved forward, pushing between the cubs who were watching the fight. "Caiacinth!" he called, making the small girl look up. Anger faded from her to be replaced by shock. She made a few quick steps backwards, her tail instinctively moving between her legs. Still sniffing, she watched as her teacher leaned over the hurt wolf. Alastor sighed again. There were bloody slashes over the boy's nose. *She certainly knows how and where to hit*, the canine thought. He picked the whimpering boy up and turned back to the girl. "Come with me," he ordered and then turned to return into the school, Caiacinth following him without saying a word. Back inside he tended to the wolf's damaged nose with the medical supplies they kept there in case the cubs should hurt themselves. Or each other. Fortunately the wounds were nothing serious. They hurt a lot but would heal quickly.

After a few minutes the wolf left the classroom, still sniffing but back on his own feet. Alastor turned to the girl who had been sitting on a table, watching silently. "Well?" the canine asked after looking into the girl's strangely colored eyes for a few moments.

"He said my mama was a bad cat," came Caiacinth's prompt reply. "He said that she left me and my papa because she did not like us."

“And?” the adult fur asked.

“She was not!” the girl said loudly, jumping off the table, her claws already unsheathing.

“Calm down, Caiacynth,” Alastor said quickly, surprised by how quickly the small fur angered. “That is not what I meant. I want to know why you hurt him.”

“Because he said bad things,” was Caia’s reply.

The canine shook his head. “But that is no reason to hurt him.”

Caiacynth crooked her head at that. “Why not?”

“Because such things are not right.”

“Why not?” the girl asked again and Alastor sighed. *Seems like I won’t have to wait until tomorrow before I have to go up to the Castle.*

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“Isn’t this a little...” Pflarrian’s voice trailed off as he watched furs assemble in the great hall of Panthera Castle, searching for the right world.

“Decadent?” Tygon asked with a grin. He too was watching how his wife directed the furs of the orchestra around.

“I was aiming for something along the lines of ‘elaborate,’ or perhaps ‘extravagant,’ but I like yours better,” Pflarrian replied, the doubt still obvious in his expression.

“Well, what good is wealth and power of one doesn’t make use of it?” the large feline asked back. “I did work hard to archive all this and thus I think I am allowed to indulge myself in some pleasures now and then.”

“I guess you’re right,” the collifox murmured, not fully convinced and trying hard not to say what he really thought. “Well, shall we return to our work?”

“Yes, we shall,” Tygon agreed and turned back to the large table they were sitting at. Several sheets of paper filled with data were scattered across the highly polished surface, in addition to no less than three laptop computers. Ever since Pflarrian had learned that he had a daughter, he had been living here in Furth 1003-2 P/R in the house of his late beloved and mother of his kit. While his own savings with the added fortune he had inherited from Mara were more than enough to get himself and his daughter through at least a decade, Pflarrian did not like the thought of having to rely on a source of funds that would dry up eventually. Plus, he hated doing nothing all day and since he did not

want to travel around the dimensions and leave Caia at home he could not work for his normal employer, the Aztec god Xolotl. So instead he sought out the Sprit of Rage, the former employer of his beloved. Pflarrian had extensive experience in traveling dimensions, something that Lord Panthera could make good use of. Thus, it had come that for the last several years the collifox had worked for Rage, helping him in various endeavors that involved interdimensional travel of some sort.

Within a matter of minutes the two males were lost in their plannings. “No, no,” Pflarrian murred. “You can’t send that many furs using spatial displacement. It might cause a rift. How about the Venzian Portal Spell?”

Rage shook his head. “No, I tried that. The magic level in the target dimension is not high enough to keep the portal stable for more than a few seconds.”

“Hmmm...” Pflarrian made a face, his fingers rubbing along his jaw line as he thought. “That means summoning is out of the question as well. Hmmm... I fear that leaves only one thing.”

“And that would be?”

“Nexus dimensions.”

Tygon laughed bitterly. “Yeah, great idea. The Kitsune would just love it when I send my troops through Escher.”

“Why should they care?” Pflarrian asked surprised. “I can’t see anything in your plans that might concern them.”

“The Kitsune and I are not exactly on friendly terms,” the large feline answered with a sigh. “Family matters.”

Pflarrian nodded, understanding. A few centuries ago Tygon’s mother, a being that these days very few individuals knew of (and even those few only called her ‘She who must not be named’), had come as close to destroying the entire Multiverse as no other being had before her. The mere fact that Rage was her son was enough for many beings to shun him.

“Well,” the collifox eventually said. “You can disperse your agents over various nexus dimensions. Send some of them using normal portal spells. It takes a lot more coordinating but it should work.”

“I would need no coordination at all if you would let me use your dimensional key.”

“True but I have seen what you are planning and I will not take any active role in this... undertaking, not even by letting you use my key. Besides, as I seem to recall

having told you a while back, I don't have it anymore anyway. It was destroyed." Unlike most people, Pflarrian had become accustomed to the company of Immortals rather quickly and thus did not waste a second thought about denying the Spirit of Rage access to the dimensional key, an artifact which at one time had allowed Pflarrian to access virtually any dimension he wanted to with relative ease. Other mortals would have gladly handed anything he'd wanted to Rage out of mere fear that he would tear their heads off. Over the last years, however, the collifox had learned enough about Tygon to judge when he could stand up to him and when he should keep out of the feline's way. It helped that Rage was the godfather of Pflarrian's daughter and thus much less likely to do anything to him than to any other mortal.

"Very well," Tygon replied after a moment, leaning back in his chair. He was about to say something else but gentle paws slid around his neck, stopping him.

"We are ready," Jirrih murred into his ears as she hugged him from behind. The smile returned to Rage's muzzle.

"Excellent," he purred back to his wife, giving her a soft kiss on the cheek before he turned back to Pflarrian. "We will continue after the dance. Feel free to stick around and watch."

"I think I will," the canine replied. "It's not like I have anywhere to go."

Without another word Tygon rose to his feet and turned to stride into the center of the hall. He had dressed in his official attire again, a black suit that looked like a cross between a tuxedo and some sort of battle armor, complete with cape. It was that cape that he now detached from his suit and cast away with a sweeping motion. The heavy fabric hung in the air for a split second before it glided down to the smooth marble floor while Tygon reached for his wife. The vixen however spun on her toe-tips and danced out of his reach. There was a sultry smile on her lips as she danced in circles around him with light, bouncing steps. She had exchanged her simple clothes for an exotic garb that consisted mostly of sheer, almost transparent silk. Rings of gold held the fabric to her body. In some places it was layered to conceal anything that was not meant for public view. Her headfur was bound into a single, thick braid, interlaced with silver strands. Tygon just grinned and pretended to ignore her, even as her thick tail swished right over his face. This little game kept going on until the two immortals stood directly in the middle of the hall. Jirrih's dancing suddenly stopped and she took her place directly before Tygon, curtsying and bowing her head. The great feline replied with a bow of his own.

That seemed to have been the signal for the sound of a guitar suddenly echoed through the hall. The music played a quick rhythm that sounded almost Spanish to Pflarrian. It lasted only for few seconds though. Then the entire orchestra that had assembled over the last hour in the great hall joined in, and started a symphonic construction that could only be described as epic. A split second before the song had really started both Jirrih and Tygon had jumped forward and the swords they were

suddenly wielding clashed together with a metallic clang. Tygon was holding a long, sword in his right that a normal fur would have needed both paws to wield while Jirrih was holding him at bay with a curved scimitar. For a moment, they stared intensely at each other before Rage suddenly twisted the blades aside and leaned close to kiss Jirrih. The vixen held the pose for a few seconds before she twisted away from him in a swirl of transparent silk and metallic flashes. Three times the swords met in less than a second until Jirrih ended in a half crouched pose a few meters away from Tygon. She sent him a feral grin before she lunged towards her husband.

Pflarrian still was not sure what to think about this, but he had grown used to the fact that most Immortals were exceedingly eccentric. Thus he just shrugged and leaned back to enjoy the show.

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Caiacynth was bouncing along the road, jumping over the small boulders that lined its sides, singing a song in a language the Alastor did not understand. He was sure that both, the song as well as her seeming endless supply of energy, was something she displayed to get back at him for telling her off. The canine, while not old, was not really young anymore either and the walk up to Panthera Castle was a long one.

“What are you singing?” he asked eventually, mostly because he hoped it would cause the girl to walk a bit slower. He was disappointed though for Caia just kept jumping, not turning even as he talked.

“It’s a song about my mama,” the fox-like girl replied.

“Your mother?”

“Yes. My uncle taught me how to sing it.” She had jumped onto one of the boulders and crouched down, turning to grin at him. “It is from another world. The furs there made it because they were afraid of her.”

Alastor decided not to reply anything to that. He did not believe either that the song was from another world or that it was about Caia’s mother. The language she had sung in was none that he had ever heard but that didn’t mean much. The kit had an active imagination and he did not put it past her to simply invent it. However, it was a fact that Alastor did not know anything about Caiacynth’s mother, except that she died shortly after the girl was born.

I think it’s time to talk to her father, the canine thought as he passed the boulder she was crouching on. The girl swished her tail and jumped off the large stone to bounce up the road again as she did before, singing that strange song again. Alastor quickly came to realize that it was a fully constructed song and the words, even though he could not understand them, did not sound like the invention of a small child.

It took teacher and pupil the better part of an hour to reach Panthera Castle, and

again the urge to turn and run had been growing steadily stronger the closer they got to the Castle's large main gate. But the thing that unsettled Alastor the most was how undisturbed Caiacynth was. He had known that the girl lived close to Panthera Castle but he had not quite believed it until now. Her violent tendencies suddenly started to make sense to the old canine.

"My papa is in there," the kit said, grinning up to her teacher. Obviously she knew about the effect the castle had on the furs of the village. Alastor grinned back to her and raised his paw to knock at the gate. He could not keep himself from hesitating though. The sounds of the knocking echoed darkly but still Caia did not show the slightest feeling of being disturbed by their surroundings while Alastor had to fight images of something terrible bursting through the gate to tear them into pieces at any moment. It did not happen. Instead a small hatch in the gate opened and blue eyes stared through it from a dark-grey face.

"Oh, Mr. Canid," the wolf behind the door said in surprise. "Need another book?"

"Yes, but actually," Alastor started, but he was interrupted by Caia.

"Hi Leo!" the girl called, jumping up and down.

"Hey Caia," Leopold replied, peering down at Caiacynth. While his muzzle was not visible one could see the smile in his eyes. His expression got very serious though as he looked back up. "Is something wrong?"

"No," Alastor replied quickly. "I just need to talk to her father."

Leo peered at the shepherd for a few moments before he spoke again. "Well, all right." The hatch closed and the sounds of heavy locks opening echoed through the air before the gate swung open. "Pflarrian is in the great hall with Lord and Lady Panthera."

Alastor nodded to the wolf as she slipped into the courtyard, past Leopold. The wolf was in his early twenties, tall and of slender build. He was clad in the red and black uniform of Lord Panthera's personal guard and the badge on his left chest showed him to be the Herald of Panthera Castle. Caiacynth emitted a happy mewl as she bounced past the wolf and towards the entrance to the castle. Alastor did his best to follow her; thankful that at least Leo was moving at his pace. He liked the wolf. Much to the teacher's surprise, Leo was always friendly. Not what he would have expected from someone who did live not only close to, but actually in Panthera Castle.

"I should warn you," Leopold said as she reached the entrance. "Lord Panthera and his wife are dancing and we should not disturb them."

"Whoo-hoo!" Caia suddenly shouted. "Dancing!" The kit slipped through the large door as soon as it was open far enough for her and was gone.

Alastor was about to hurry after her but Leo held him back. “Don’t worry,” said with a smile. “She knows her way.”

“But Lord Panthera...”

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” the wolf replied with a chuckle. “He would not dare to do anything to Caia, even if she would run into him and Lady Jirrih in bed.”

“Why not?” Alastor asked, surprised and not just a bit curious.

“Well, her mother might find out.”

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If Pflarrian hadn’t known for a fact that Jirrih and Tygon loved each other, he could have easily mistaken their dance for an actual fight. The two furs moved through the Great Hall, a blur of lightning fast motions and flashes of metal. Again and again the clanging sounds echoed through the hall as their weapons met, and Pflarrian found himself wondering whether that ‘dance’ was actually choreographed or if the two Immortals were making it up as they went. It looked so much like a real fight, it was almost disturbing to watch how well it fitted to the music the orchestra was still playing. *Then again, the collifox thought, I would expect no less from Rage. Interesting to see how much skill Jirrih had gained though.*

The vixen had not been born immortal like Tygon, but was granted Immortality as a sort of wedding gift. As a former member of the spirit’s harem she had been enhanced by a device the Spirit of Invention had built years ago. Thus her stamina and resistance to physical damage had been distinctly increased, but even that would not have allowed her to keep up with Tygon that easily. *Rather interesting, Pflarrian mused as he took a few notes. I must talk to her about that later.*

They had offered to use the same device on Pflarrian and he had almost accepted. Aside the obvious effects it would easily double his life expectancy. However, since the device had been built to create and enhance a harem for an Immortal it also significantly increased the subject’s sex-drive. That was something Pflarrian could not afford at all, and so he had declined.

He was pulled from his musings as Jirrih made a backflip and in mid-air threw something small and metallic at Tygon. The great cat jumped aside, again displaying a surprising agility for someone of his size and hit the object out of the air with his sword. His left paw shot forward and snatched the five-pronged throwing star up. “My sneaky little vixen,” he purred to Jirrih. “You have trained.” No sooner than he had finished talking he let the weapon fly again, back towards his wife. The vixen did not jump aside like Tygon had done. Instead she caught the throwing star and threw it back at Tygon in a single motion almost too fast to follow with the bare eye. The Spirit of Rage roared loudly as the blades of the star dug into his shoulder, not having expected that reaction

from his wife. He made a step backwards and pulled the weapon out of his flesh.

“You have no idea,” Jirrih murred to him as she grabbed the handle of the scimitar with both paws. There was a ripple in the fabric of reality, a small flash and a split-second later the vixen was holding two scimitars, one in each paw. Tygon grinned and dropped the throwing star. For the first time since the dance had begun he grabbed his sword with both paws as Jirrih emitted a high scream and jumped forward, both scimitars slicing the air dangerously.

Even if it had not seemed possible, Jirrih and Tygon picked the pace up even more. Their motions became even faster and soon Pflarrian gave up trying to follow what they were doing. The only times when he recognized anything were split seconds when the two jumped apart to quickly analyze the situation before they attacked again. The end came just as quickly. Somehow, Pflarrian could not catch how, Tygon had managed to make Jirrih stumble backwards and he capitalized on this advantage. The vixen brought up her scimitars and crossed them to stop the powerful blow that came from her husband and while she managed to do so the sheer force of his attack pushed her back down to the ground. With a growl Tygon followed her, crouching over the vixen. She hissed at him, baring her teeth in an almost feral way. For a moment the scene seemed to be frozen. Even the orchestra stopped playing, only to end their song with a last, powerful note as Jirrih and Tygon kissed passionately.

The situation had a surreal quality about it that was only broken when a shout of glee echoed through the hall. Every fur, even Rage and his wife, turned towards the east entrance to the hall where a small girl was clapping her small paws with glee. She bounced into the huge room a moment later.

“Lady Caiacynth Collifox-Khan in company of Alastor Canid,” Leopold pronounced loudly. Alastor was standing slack-jawed into the hall. He had witnessed the last minute or so of the sword-dance and it was not what he had expected. It even took him a while to register what Leo had said.

“I am her company?” he asked, staring at the wolf.

“Sorry,” Leo replied with a shrug and a smile. “As a resident of Panthera Castle she is of higher rank than you.”

That answer obviously satisfied Alastor for he nodded and walked into the Hall. Tygon and Jirrih had risen back to their feet by now, their weapons gone. The vixen quickly straightened her dress and hurried to retrieve her husband’s cape. “Mr. Canid,” the great cat said, greeting the canine who bowed deeply. “I hope everything is well at the school.”

“Yes, Lord Panthera,” Alastor replied as Tygon walked towards him. “Please allow me to thank you again for your gracious contributions.”

“I like to see the furs of my domain properly educated,” the feline replied as

Jirrih returned to his side, fastening his cape back to his shoulders. "But tell me, what can I do for you."

"Umm..." Alastor hesitated for a moment, glancing to Pflarrian. "Actually, I would like to talk to Mr. Collifox," he said eventually.

"Ah, I see," Tygon replied, his eyes narrowing. "I hope there is nothing wrong with Caiacinth."

"Not directly, no, my Lord." The canine teacher was getting visibly uncomfortable as his Lord stared at him.

"Very well," the big cat eventually said. "He is over there. Feel free to take a seat."

Alastor nodded, thankful to turn his attention somewhere else. Behind his back Tygon leaned down to nuzzle his wife and gave her another kiss before they followed the canine to the long table where Pflarrian was still sitting. Caiacinth had spotted her father and jumped into his lap purring happily as she snuggled against him.

"Good day, Mr. Canid," the collifox said as the teacher reached the table.

"Good day to you too, Mr. Collifox."

"Please, call me Pflarrian," came the reply. "I hate being called Mr. Collifox."

"Very well," Alastor said with a nod. "Then please call me Alastor."

"I shall. So, what can I do for you?"

"I have come to talk to you about Caiacinth."

Pflarrian raised an eyebrow. "What has she done?"

"She started a fight at school."

"You did what?" Pflarrian asked, looking down to his daughter.

"He started it!" the girl replied, her voice full of indignation.

"It seems like one of her classmates offended her mother and she gave him a few cuts over his nose in return."

"He said mama was a bad cat!" Caia shouted to explain and justify her actions.

To Alastor's surprise Pflarrian's gaze did not return to Caia but fixed on Tygon

instead, who had taken a place behind the canine. “Don’t even think about it, Rage!” the collifox called. “I will sort this out.” He gave his daughter a gentle hug and the set her back on the ground. “Caia, I would like to talk to Mr. Canid alone for a moment.”

“Nooooo!” the girl started to wail. She hated it when the grown-ups left her out of things but Jirrih intervened.

“Why don’t you come with me,” the vixen said in her soft voice, moving past Alastor and kneeling down beside the girl. “Nell has made a few new dresses that need to be tried on.” Immediately Caia’s wailing stopped to be replied by a shout of glee. A moment later the two females had disappeared from the hall. For a few moments there was an eerie silence in the Great Hall before Pflarrian spoke again.

“How much do you know about my wife?” he asked, his calm gaze upon Alastor.

“Only that she died and Caia never got to know her,” the shepherd replied.

“She was not a bad woman, and neither was she a bad mother,” Pflarrian said. “She lost her life in an attempt to make sure that our life as a family would be safe and happy.” His voice had started to shake a bit but he kept his gaze steady.

“I was not doubting that,” Alastor quickly replied quickly. “However, I think growing up without a mother is having a bad effect on Caiacynth.”

“What kind of bad effect?”

“Well, for one, there is her readiness to use violence and she seems not to understand that it is wrong.”

Pflarrian’s eyes darted to Rage who simply shrugged. “Don’t look at me, Pflarr. I can’t help it.”

Alastor turned around to look at the great feline for a moment, a confused expression on his face, but before he could say anything Pflarrian spoke again.

“There is something else?”

“Um, yes,” the canine said, directing his attention back to the collifox. “She is inventing stories. Just today she was singing some weird song that she said was about her mother. You see, I think...”

Pflarrian interrupted the teacher by raising his paw. As Alastor fell silent he again looked at Tygon who gazed back at the collifox for a few heavy moments. Then he nodded and rose from his seat. With slow steps he left the hall and the servants followed him. A few moments later Pflarrian and Alastor were alone. The hybrid sighed, his eyes closing. “What would you say if I told you that those are not stories?”

“What?” the canine asked in reply.

“Everything Caia might have told you about her mother is most likely true.” Pflarrian reached into the back pocket of his pants and pulled a small booklet out of it. “This is her. Mara Khan,” he said, showing Alastor the photo of an athletic feline. “She worked for Lord Panthera as a professional assassin.”

The canine’s eyes went wide. “A-a-assassin?”

Pflarrian nodded. “But that is only half of it.” Over the next hour or so Pflarrian explained to Alastor Canid that Mara actually *did* travel between different worlds and dimensions in order to fulfill the missions she had been given. He also told him what Lord Panthera really was and that Pflarrian himself had come from another world to live here and raise his daughter.

The canine took it surprisingly well. He listened quietly and after Pflarrian had finished his first question was. “How much of that does Caiacynth know?”

“Most of it,” Pflarrian replied. “She knows what her mother did to earn her living. She knows what Tygon really is and that there are other worlds aside from this one. Now and then when I am forced to travel I even take her with me.”

“I understand.” Alastor took a deep breath. “Well, that certainly explains a lot. I... I guess I have no choice but accept it. I just wonder...”

“Wonder... what?” Pflarrian asked.

“If everything you told me is true... then why do you send her to our school? There must be other schools in all these worlds that could deal much better with a kit in Caia’s unique situation.”

The collifox smiled and nodded. “Oh, there indeed are. I have thought very long about what I should do to ensure little Caia’s education. There are many schools that deal with children that have access to interdimensional travel of some sort. However, I ruled them out pretty early.”

“Why?”

“For the simple reason of who Caiacynth is,” Pflarrian explained. “She is the daughter of Mara Khan and Mara Khan had a lot of enemies. At an interdimensional school we could not rule out that she might run into one of them. In addition to that, the Spirit of Rage is her godfather and while there are few beings stupid enough to risk drawing his anger on them we could not rule out that some would try and use Caia to get to him in some way. Neither Rage nor myself wanted to expose her to such a danger.”

“I understand,” Alastor said, nodding slowly.

“We could have hired a private teacher for her and have her educated right here in Panthera Castle. However, I did not like that idea either. I wanted Caia to grow up with cubs and kits of her own age.” Pflarrian sighed. “I knew that it would not be easy. I did not know that she was attacking other kits.”

“Well, it’s not like she is doing it constantly.”

The collifox nodded. “Yes, I know. She simply is not restricting her anger. I fear that is a side effect of living here. Rage can’t really help it, as he said.”

Alastor stared blankly at Pflarrian. The knowledge that Tygon indeed was not merely the ruler of the region but something could easily qualify as a monster if he wanted to, did nothing to reduce the canine’s fear of Lord Panthera or Panthera Castle.

“I will talk to Lord Panthera,” Pflarrian said quickly. “I am sure we can find a way to reduce his influence on Caia.”

“Thank you,” Alastor said with a nod. “I think I should be going then.”

“Thank you for taking the time to tell me of Caia’s behavior. I will do my best to make sure that she won’t attack another of her classmates.”

The two furs rose to their feet and left the Hall. “I hope you will understand that I have to say goodbye to you now. I need to talk to my daughter,” Pflarrian said.

“Of course,” the canine replied. “Good bye, Pflarrian.”

“Goodbye, Alastor. I will send for Leopold. He can help you with any books you need.”

Suddenly the canine stopped and turned back towards Pflarrian. “That reminds me,” he said. “Something I wanted to ask you.”

“What is it?”

“Well, when Leopold let me and Caia in he said something about Lord Panthera not daring to hurt her because her mother might find out.”

Pflarrian nodded, seeing what Alastor meant. “Death,” the hybrid said slowly. “Is not permanent.” The Sheppard stared at Pflarrian for a moment but then nodded a single time, turned and left.

Pflarrian made his way through the labyrinthine hallways of Panthera Castle until he reached the chambers that used to house Tygon’s harem, before he married Jirrig and

passed most of the femmes on to new masters. These days it was used by the few femmes who chose to remain at Panthera Castle and still slept in these rooms out of habit. One of these females was Nell, the seamstress of the castle. The vixen had created pretty much every piece of clothing that existed in Panthera Castle, from the guard's uniforms, to Rage's suits, to Caia's play clothes.

Pflarrian blinked as he entered the main harem chamber, a large, brightly lit room in an oriental style dominated by the large stained-glass window set high in the far wall, as well as a large pool. The collifox did not pay any attention to these though. He directed his steps to one of the side chambers. As he opened the door he was greeted by a chaos of colors. Sheets of fabric in various colors, textures, and sizes, were strewn seemingly at random about the room. However, living in close proximity to Panthera Castle taught Pflarrian that this chaos made perfect sense to Nell. The long-legged vixen stood in the center of the room, in the process of putting the finishing touches on a striking red dress that Jirrih was wearing. The color matched perfectly with the other vixen's fur coloration, to the point that Pflarrian was not sure where fur stopped and where fabric began.

"Papa!" a small voice called and from the right Caiacynth hurried towards him. The girl stopped a few meters before Pflarrian and turned, smiling with glee. She was wearing a dress that seemed to be cut in the same way as Jirrih but Caia's was of the same tawny brown that her fur was.

Pflarrian smiled broadly and swept the girl up in his arms. She squealed with glee, her small arms wrapping around her father's neck as soon as she could reach it. Purring happily, Caia buried her small muzzle against Pflarrian throat while he looked for a place to sit down.

After the talk with Alastor Canid, Pflarrian had been haunted by doubts about his decisions. Maybe it had been wrong to move to Mara's place. It had seemed like the right decision back then, but it created about as many problems as it solved. He wanted Caia to grow up like a normal kit, even if he knew how difficult that was when her father regularly associated with Immortals. And that was without the obvious problems with her having to grow up without a mother. In such a situation doubts came quickly.

However, now that Pflarrian was holding Caia, the child his beloved had died to make sure had a future, the doubts melted away. Pflarrian's decisions might not have been perfect but they were the ones he deemed right and he would stand by them. With gentle motions he stroked Caiacynth's back while the girl purred softly as she snuggled closely to her father. What was done was done. No turning back.

The end